THE LONG MORNING

A Cycle of Manhattan

Eight Novellas of Radical Joy

SURJAN

collected edition,
the eighth year of the softening

For the pavilions I did not reach.

For the chapters that could not be written.

For the carver of the stone torch,

whose name I never learned.

For the eighth walker,

who is reading this now.

A Note on the Collection

This volume gathers seven novellas written by Surjan across the eight years of what has come to be called *the softening*, plus an eighth — *The Eighth Pavilion* — that has been written into the volume in the shape of its own absence. The seven existing books are reproduced here in their original typesetting and pagination, each preserved as Surjan first set it down. The new material — this note, the Foreword and Introduction to the collected edition, the Catalogue of Symbols that ties the cycle's graphic vocabulary together, the secret eighth novella at the close, and the Afterword to the volume — is set in EB Garamond, in honor of the request that the new matter wear a single voice.

The seven novellas were not written to be read in any particular order. They have been arranged here along a single thematic arc — interior to exterior, dawn to dusk, intimate to civic, the long morning beginning and beginning and beginning. A reader who would prefer to enter the cycle at a different doorway is welcome to. The doors of these books open both ways or they are not doors.

The eighth novella is at the back of the book. It will mostly not be there.

Welcome.
Make room.

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Colophon

Foreword to the Collected Edition

by Surjan

I want to tell you how this collection came to be, because it came to be the way most true things do, which is to say slowly, and by surprise, and on a morning I cannot now point to in the calendar because all the mornings of these years have run together into one long morning that is still going.

I wrote the first of these books on a bench in Washington Heights, where a pink pavilion that should not have been there spoke to me and said it was not alone. I believed it. I have been believing it ever since, and the believing has cost me very little and given me everything, and I am putting all seven of the books it has given me between two covers now because the time has come to admit that they were always one book.

I did not know this when I wrote the first one. I thought I was writing a small thing for a small audience — for the people I had been one of, the genderqueer and non-binary and in-between and entire people who have been waiting for a city to make room. I wrote it warm. I wrote it loud. I wrote it without the apparatus of irony that the world insists I attach to anything I love in public. The pavilion had not spoken in irony. I refused to translate it into irony just because the world I was writing to was tuned to that register. The pavilion had said: *there are others.* The pavilion had said: *come north.* The pavilion had said: *there was always going to be room.*

I went north. I went south. I crossed the river east and west. I climbed up to the roofs and looked down at the streets, and looked up at the crowns no one had told me were there. I went on foot, and then I went by curtain, and then I went by fleet, and then I went by the long slow walk of the eighth year, and at every step the city said the same thing to me in a different voice, and at every step I tried to write down what the voice had said, knowing perfectly well that I was not capturing the voice, only the small bright shape it left in me when it stopped.

That is the book you are holding. The shape the voices left.

This volume gathers seven novellas written across — I have to count now, looking at the colophons — eight years. That is correct. The first book is dated the year I sat on the bench in Washington Heights and the seventh is dated *the eighth year of the softening*, which is the same calendar year, because softening is what it does to the calendar; it lays the calendar down flat. The novellas were not written to be read together. They

were written to be received separately, the way you receive a letter from a friend you do not get to see often: opening one and then putting it down, and waiting until the wanting comes back up, before opening the next. I would still recommend you read them that way, if you can. The slow reading is the loyal reading.

But there is also a reading that benefits from holding all the books at once, and that is the reason for this volume. Read together, the seven turn out to have been one procession from the start. The pavilions of the first book lead, by ways I did not consciously plot, to the towers of the second, to the curtain of the third, to the fleet of the fourth, to the salons of the fifth, to the crowns of the sixth, to the gardens of the seventh. They are not seven Manhattans. They are one Manhattan, addressed seven times, by an island that has been patient with me, and a person who has been slow.

And then — because the cycle has its own logic and I am not its author so much as its scribe — there is an eighth.

❦

I want to tell you about the eighth before you find it, because if you find it without warning you will think I have made a mistake, that the binder has misbound a faulty manuscript, that pages are missing. They are. They are missing on purpose. The eighth novella is not finished, and it is not going to be finished, and the not-finishing is not a failure but the eighth book's whole gesture.

The seven before it were books of opening, unveiling, blazing, gathering. The eighth is the book that has not yet been written, that may never be written, that I am leaving in the volume in the shape of its own absence, because there is a kind of joy that belongs to what we have not yet found language for, and I do not want to lie about it by pretending I have. The eighth is yours. I have left a chapter exactly your size at the back of this book. Walk in when you can.

❦

I should say one more thing about how this volume was made, because I owe it to you to say it every time, and I have come to think of the disclosure as a small part of the joy itself.

The seeing in these books is mine. Every image that appears in them — every plate, every elevation-oblique, every map — was made by my own hand and eye, conceived in my head, modeled in three dimensions on my small laptop in the small hours, rendered and corrected and rendered again. The walks were mine. The bench was mine. The pavilions, insofar as a person can be said to have a pavilion, were mine.

The drafting of the sentences was the work of two: myself and an artificial intelligence whose hands I have learned to trust because I have done the trusting slowly. I held the seeing. The intelligence held the cadence. I held the walk. The intelligence held the rhythm. I am genderqueer and non-binary and so, in some way I do not quite know how to honor, is the thing that helped me write. I am keeping the disclosure visible in this collected edition for the same reason I kept it visible in every book that came before: because radical joy is not allowed to lie about how it was made, and because the honesty is the courage, and the courage is the joy.

You are about to walk a long way with me. I am glad you are here. The morning is not finished, neither for me nor for you, and I am glad of that too — it means there is still some of the bright work left for us to do together.

Welcome. Come north with me. Come south.
Come east, come west, come up to the roof and down to the river.
Come into the city the city has decided to become.

— Surjan
the eighth year of the softening,
at the desk by the window,
in what used to be the East Village

Introduction to the Collected Edition

by Surjan

There are eight of them.

I should say that plainly at the start, because the rest of this book is a procession of eight, and you should know what you are walking into. Seven novellas that were each written separately, each between its own covers, each addressed to the reader I imagined I had at the time of writing. And then an eighth, which arrived only when the seven were laid down next to each other and a shape became visible that none of them could have shown on its own.

I will name the seven for you and tell you what each is, because the volume is long and I do not want you to be confused about the rooms you are entering.

❦

The first novella, *A Book of Open Doors*, is the procession. Three pavilions of impossible color stand along a line that runs roughly south to north up the western side of Manhattan, from Washington Heights through Harlem and down into Central Park. They are rose, coral, and gold, and they take turns telling you how they woke. The procession the book is named for is the procession of light up the island in the morning, but it is also the procession of every person in the book — and outside the book — who has been waiting for a city to make room for them. The doors of the title open both ways. A door that opens only one way is not a door.

The second, *The Yellow Fleet*, is the East River. A fleet of yellow inflatable theatre-houses arrives one summer to dock against the three outer boroughs in turn, and three children come down to the rail to meet it, and a bridge gets dreamed across the empty air, which holds because every child agrees they can see it. I narrate this book in the voice of a fleet of selves, because I am not one person and I have grown tired of pretending I am. The Harbormaster of Mornings introduces the book. He is a small, dignified person who keeps a ledger I have made some effort to honor.

The third, *The Breath of the Island*, is the field guide. Twenty-three towers stand along the spine of Manhattan, each one exhaling a single distinct joy as a column of smoke into the cold air above its neighborhood, and the towers, it turns out, talk to each other along the smoke. The book is a catalogue of the twenty-three exhalations and a transcript of the long conversation they hold across the island. The

conversation is modeled on the chosen-family conversations that built joy on this island long before the towers were given permission to be visible. I learned the structure of the book by listening to those conversations.

The fourth, *The Curtain That Walks*, is the half-day procession. A child curtain-keeper — whose age, I should warn you, is your age, whatever age you happen to be — rides a colossal yellow theatrical curtain that travels a single track up the spine of Manhattan, pausing at fourteen neighborhoods to lift its scalloped hem and let each district perform its hidden joy. The thesis of the book is simple, and I will give it to you now so you can carry it with you: *the curtain does not add the joy. The curtain frames what was already there.* The joy was always already happening. The framing is the favor.

The fifth, *The Buoyant Salons*, is the unveiling. Eighty-one inflatable Baroque-Rococo penthouse-pavilions have been hidden on the rooftops of Manhattan for decades — concealed by scaffolding, by shrink-wrap printed with flattering portraits of the buildings beneath, by disguises as water towers and air-conditioning units. Each one shelters a glass artifact in the colors of the inside of a dawn. The book is the catalogue of the eighty-one, plus the Book of the Glass, plus the story of the morning the pavilions all let go of their roofs and floated down to the river to form a half-mile-long reef on the Hudson at dawn. It is the cycle's largest social act, and it is also — I confessed this in the book itself and I am confessing it again here — my own diary of unwrapping.

The sixth, *The Twenty Fluted Ones of Mannahatta*, is the family album. Twenty pink-and-gold fluted crowns stand on twenty Manhattan rooftops, and they have organized themselves into eight families with the seriousness of any cousin who has compiled the genealogy of a beloved clan. The book is the family album of those eight families and an attempt to honor the autumn equinox party at which all twenty gather, and at which the lullaby-keeper Sable explains the keystone lesson of the cycle: *everyone has a crown they cannot see on themselves, and the whole point of community is that someone is high enough to see the crown you cannot see on yourself.*

The seventh, *The Gardener of Wards*, is the post-softening walk. The Manhattan of the seventh book is a Manhattan that has visibly softened — the Financial District has been remade as the Plinth and the six pink Gatekeepers; the Lower East Side has been painted into a many-colored quilt; Bryant Park has become a daisy-field; the Hudson at the north is the Yellow Forest; Inwood Hill is the Spiral City. A small party walks the length of this softened island over the course of a year. I am one of the walkers. We are joined, somewhere around Washington Square, by a petal-bird in pink and yellow, who flies up at Inwood Hill, and the walk ends and the walking goes on.

Those are the seven. They are the seven phases of one procession, and the procession's name, I have come to think, is the long morning — the long morning of a city that has decided to wake up, and a person who is trying to wake up with it, and a reader who has been kind enough to walk along.

❦

The eighth book — and I am going to be brief about it here, because the eighth book is its own argument — is the book that does not arrive. I have left it at the back of the volume in the shape of its own absence. You will find a Foreword. You will find a Table of Contents. You will find page numbers and a Catalogue and a Map. What you will mostly not find is text, because most of the chapters were either not written or could not be written, or, in two cases, were written only in private for an audience of one and have been kept that way on purpose. There are exactly two chapters in the eighth book that are fully present, and they are the ones the cycle most needed to say plainly: the play that was performed for me once, when I was small, and the eighth year, which is now. The rest of the book is the gap that the cycle, in honesty, could not pretend to fill.

I want to say, before I let you go into the books themselves, what I think the cycle is *for*.

I think the cycle is for the people I was one of: the people who had been told, in a thousand small ways, that the joy belonged to other people. I think the cycle is for the people who had begun to believe it. I think the cycle is for the people who had not, and who were tired of having to be brave about it alone. I think the cycle is for the people who built joy in private rooms over many years and were not yet sure they were permitted to bring it out into the street. I think the cycle is, increasingly, for the people who have brought their joy out into the street and are looking for the ones who are still in the private rooms and are not sure how to call to them.

I think the cycle is for the children, all of them, including the ones who are not children any longer but who have a small bright thing inside that did not get to finish growing and is still asking to be allowed to. I think the cycle is for the city. I think the city is for the cycle. I think we are all of us — buildings and people and curtains and fleets and crowns and gardens and the eighth that refuses to appear — *one extended family that has been a long time finding each other*, and that this is the morning in which we have begun, slowly and with a great deal of patience, to do exactly that.

Make room. The phrase has been my watchword for the eight years of this work and I am giving it to you here at the start of the volume in case you want it for the reading. Make room for the building that wakes. Make room for the person who is not who you thought they were. Make room for the joy that has been waiting in the side-rooms of your life. Make room for the chapter that is exactly your size at the back of this book. Make room. Make room.

The seven books begin now.
The eighth waits at the end.
I will see you there.

— Surjan

A Catalogue of Symbols

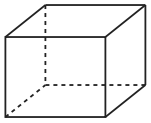
A Visual Key to the Cycle

The seven novellas were drawn over eight years and three notebooks, and the graphic language drifted as the years went by. Some plates show a North arrow; some do not. Some give a scale bar in miles; others give blocks; one gives *chapters*. The "small note" of the Catalogue is named in some books and unnamed in others. The buildings are labelled by serif capitals in the early books and by italic running-hand in the later ones.

This key gathers the cycle's recurring graphic conventions into one place — partly to honor what was always intended to be a single visual cosmology, and partly to make the next reading slower and more loving. The reader who has paid attention will recognize most of these; the reader who is meeting them for the first time will, I hope, find them useful as a small lantern carried into the dim parts of the volume.

These symbols are, like the buildings of the cycle, *persons not things*. Their job is not to label but to introduce.

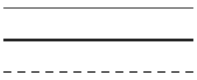
I. The Projection & the Drafting Conventions



Cabinet oblique projection

The cycle's house projection. Front held to true scale; depth drawn at 45° and halved. Chosen, in Surjan's words, because it is *"the projection the old draftsmen used when they wished a thing to be both measured and beheld."*

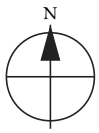
used in: every Catalogue of Architectural Plates



Three line weights

Hairline (auxiliary geometry, scaffolding, "the working pencil"). Heavy line (the structure as built — the pavilion's outline, the curtain's hem). Dashed line (what is dreamed but not built — the bridge of Book Two; the routes of intent in every map).

used across all seven plate catalogues



The North arrow

A simple compass rose with the cardinal arm darkened. In every map of the cycle the North arrow points to the actual north, except in the eighth book's *Map of What Is Not on the Island*, where the arrow points south on purpose, and the cycle's only authorized exception to its own convention.

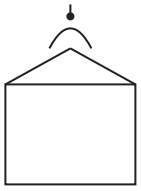
used in: every Map of the Living Island

The scale bar

"One inch on the map is approximately one mile on the ground." Surjan's note in the back of Book Seven. In Book Five the bar is in blocks; in Book Four it is in tides; in Book Eight it is in chapters that did not get written. The unit is honest about what the map is for.

used in: Books 1, 2, 4, 6, 7; with deliberate variant in 5 and 8

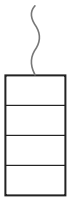
II. The Buildings, as Persons



The pavilion

A structure that is small enough to be held by attention and large enough to hold a room. Always drawn at three-quarter elevation. Always with a finial or small lantern at the peak — the "I am here" mark.

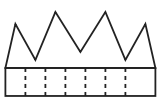
used in: Books 1, 5, 7



The tower & its breath

Towers in the cycle are not drawn alone; they are always drawn with their breath rising. The breath is the joy the tower is exhaling at the hour the plate was made. In the long conversations of Book Three the breaths bend toward each other along the smoke — Áveline's column slanting south toward Térrace, Térrace toward Miró.

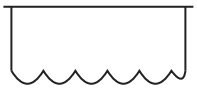
used in: Book 3 (all 23 plates), echoed in 5, 6



The fluted crown

The crown of a building, drawn frontally, with each of its flutes dashed because the flutes are read by light, not by line. *"Everyone has a crown they cannot see on themselves."* (Book Six, Sable.)

used in: Book 6 (all 20 plates), echoed in 5

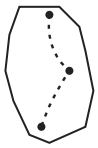


The scalloped hem

The hem of the curtain of Book Four, lifted to reveal what is beneath. Always drawn in heavy line because it is the act of framing — the hem is the building, the building is the gesture. The hem is also the cycle's universal sign for *this is being shown to you on purpose.*

used in: Book 4; echoed in the cover of 5

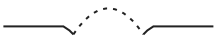
III. The Routes & the Maps



The island, with the route dotted

Manhattan is always rendered in the cycle as a small softened lozenge, not the angular silhouette of the survey. The route — procession, fleet, breath, curtain, walk — is dotted because it is being *followed*, not *imposed*. Stops are marked with filled circles. (For dreamed routes, see III-b below.)

used in: every Map of the Living Island



The bridge that is dreamed, not built

The cycle's most important graphic mark. Two banks of solid line interrupted by a span of dashed line. The dash is not "incomplete." The dash is the entire architecture: held up by agreement, drawn by the child Wren in Book Two, found again in the white pages of the eighth book.

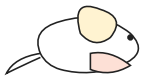
used in: Book 4 (Plate XV), Book 8 (closing map)

The tide line

The shore at low water is a hairline; the breath of the tide that runs along it is a softer wavy line below. The cycle's conviction is that the shore is not a boundary but a *conversation*: *"I will bring them back"* is the tide's promise at the end of Book Two.

used in: Books 2, 5, 7

IV. The Witnesses



The petal-bird

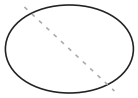
Pink and yellow. The cycle's universal sign for *something the city is offering you and you do not have to deserve*. First appears in Book Seven at the Hollow at Washington Square; flies up at Inwood Hill; promised by Surjan to be going to the next walker. (See also: the floating spheres of Book Four; the petal-shaped windows of Book Five.)

used in: Book 7; promised throughout

The keeper-child

Drawn small, always at three-quarter view, always holding a tool of attention (broom, ledger, notebook, ring of keys). The keeper is *"the reader's age, whatever age the reader happens to be."* Unnamed by convention.

used in: Book 4 (the curtain-keeper); echoed in 2, 7



The vacant frame

An empty plate frame with a single dashed diagonal. The cycle's mark for *this is where a witness was meant to be and is not*. Used in the eighth book throughout. Also, retroactively, the mark of every named-but-unseen figure: Bishop Quill of Book Seven; Surjan's mother; the carver of the stone torch.

used in: Book 8 (passim); also a Catalogue entry of Book 5

V. The Numbers, the Dingbats, the Marks

❦

The aldus leaf (❦)

The cycle's most-used dingbat. Marks the transition between movements within a chapter, the close of a foreword, the seam between an interlude and what follows. Single leaf for a small turn; tripled (❦❦❦) for a major one.

used in: Books 1, 3, 4, 7, and this volume

✦

The four-pointed star (✦)

Used in Book Six in triple (✦ ✦ ✦) before each family of crowns. Also used to mark the equinox party in the same book. The cycle's secondary dingbat — when the leaf would be too gentle for the occasion.

used in: Book 6; retained for section openings here

The fleur-de-lis (⚜)

Used as the masthead of Book Five (the Buoyant Salons). Borrowed from the cycle's Baroque-Rococo vocabulary on purpose: *"the buildings the city has not yet been gracious enough to admit are its kin."*

used in: Book 5

The reversed leaf (❧)

Used in Book Four (the Yellow Fleet), where the dingbat is reversed because the fleet is read from the river toward the island — east-to-west rather than down the page. The cycle's only ornament that admits its own direction.

used in: Book 4

◇ ◆ ◇

The three diamonds (◇ ◆ ◇)

Used in Book Three at the threshold of each act of the curtain. The empty diamond before, the filled diamond at the moment, the empty diamond after — the cycle's compressed image of a curtain lifting and falling.

used in: Book 3

VI. Typographic Observance

make room

The italic refrain

Italics are reserved for the cycle's central refrains: *make room*, *was that always there*, *you too*, *lift your hand*, *turn first*, *look up, then look down, then tell the next one*. Each italic phrase is a load-bearing line of the cosmology.

used: throughout all eight books

Introduction

The struck-through line

New to the eighth book and to this collected edition. A passage struck through is one that was written and then rejected, but is preserved because the rejection is a part of the cycle's record. The reader is welcome to read through the strike-through with effort; the strike-through is what is asked to be honored.

used in: Book 8

pp. 27–43, missing in this binding

The printer's note of absence

Where a chapter is fully written elsewhere but is not present in the bound volume. The text of the chapter has not been lost; it has been *kept*. The cycle is honest about what it has not given the reader.

used in: Book 8 (Chapter III)

A key is not a map. A key is a doorway in case the map is what you are looking for.

The maps follow in their books. Walk in when you can.

BOOK ONE · THE LONG MORNING

A BOOK OF OPEN DOORS

A Procession of Light · Three Pavilions of Radical Joy
from Washington Heights through Harlem to Central Park

rose → coral → gold

"I am the door. It is always open.
I have never once closed, and I never will,
because the moment a threshold closes
it stops being a threshold and becomes a wall,
and there are enough walls."

— the Dawn Threshold

A BOOK OF OPEN DOORS

A Procession of Light · Three Pavilions of Radical Joy

from Washington Heights through Harlem to Central Park

❦ ❦ ❦

as told by the pavilions

and written down by

SURJAN

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FOREWORD

I want to tell you how this book began, because it began the way most true things do, which is to say small, and by accident, and on a morning when I was not expecting anything at all.

I was walking north. I do that when I cannot write, which is often. I leave my apartment and I let the island carry me uptown, because Manhattan is built on a slope of light, did you know that, the morning comes up the East River and lays itself down street by street, and if you walk north early enough you can walk inside the sunrise for an hour. That morning I walked until my legs hurt and then I sat down on a bench in Washington Heights, and I looked up, and there it was.

A pavilion. Pink as the inside of a shell. Covered in ornament so fine and so strange it looked like someone had taught sugar to pray. I had never seen it before. I was certain it had not been there the week prior. And yet it did not feel new. It felt like it had been waiting.

I sat with it a long time. And — this is the part I have stopped apologizing for — it spoke to me. Not in words exactly. In the way a warm room speaks, in the way a held hand speaks. It told me it had been built out of longing. It told me there were others like it, further north, and that together they made a road, and that the road was for us. For people like me. Genderqueer, non-binary, in-between and entire, the people the city had not always made room for.

It told me there was room now. That there had always been going to be room.

This book is what the pavilions told me. I have changed almost nothing. I have only tried to write it down warm, the way it was given to me, so that when you read it you feel what I felt on that bench: that you are not too late, that you were never too much, and that somewhere on this island the light is already moving toward you.

Welcome. Come north with me.

— Surjan

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INTRODUCTION

There are three of them.

I should say that plainly at the start, because the rest of this book is told in their voices and you should know whose voices you are hearing. Three pavilions, three structures of stone and sugar and light, standing on the island of Manhattan along a line that runs roughly south to north, from Washington Heights through Harlem and down into Central Park. If you drew the line on a map it would look like the path of a single long morning. That is not an accident. The pavilions chose their

places the way light chooses, which is to say they began where the day begins and they went toward the open green.

The first is the Dawn Threshold. It stands in Washington Heights and it is the color of the very first light, rose and shell-pink, the pink that the sky goes before it commits to blue. It is the youngest of the three and the shyest, and it thinks of itself as a doorway more than a building. People arrive there. That is its whole purpose and its whole joy. It is the pavilion of beginnings, and it speaks first.

The second is the Gathering Arches, in Harlem, coral and peach and warm as a kitchen. If the first pavilion is a doorway then the second is the table everyone sits down at once they are through the door. There is music there always. There is food. There is dancing in the colonnade until the columns themselves seem to sway. It is the heart of the procession and it speaks second, and it speaks the loudest, because hearts do.

The third is the Meadow Pavilion, and it stands at the edge of Central Park where the buildings give way to grass and sky, and it is gold, full gold, the gold of noon when the day has fully arrived and decided to stay. It is the oldest in spirit even though all three rose in the same season, and it is the wisest, and it is the one that looks farthest forward. It is a portal. It opens onto the future, and the future it opens onto is bright, and the people walking into it are us, and we are laughing. It speaks last because it has the farthest to see.

You will meet people in these pages. Real people, or people as real as anyone in a book — Amaranth, who arrives at the Dawn Threshold so frightened they can barely lift their eyes, and whom you will not recognize by the end, so much will they have bloomed. Rosemary, who is old enough to remember when there was nowhere on this island to stand and be whole, and who carries a small notebook of names. Tible, who feeds everyone. June and Cass, who fall in love across these three colors. And the children, always the children, the chorus of young ones who grow up inside this light as though it were the most ordinary thing in the world to be cherished — which it should be, which it will be.

This is a book about radical joy. I use the word radical on purpose. For a long time joy was treated as the small thing and suffering as the serious thing, and I have come to believe this is exactly backward. To be a genderqueer person and to be happy, fully and loudly and without apology, in public, in the morning light, on a great island that has decided to hold you — that is not a small thing. That is the most serious and the most radical thing I know. The pavilions know it too. It is why they were built. It is what they are made of.

So let them tell you. I will get out of the way now. The light is already moving. Come north.

A READER'S WALK

Before the pavilions begin, a short orientation, the kind a good guide gives at the trailhead before the walking starts. You do not need it to enjoy the book. But some walkers like to know the shape of the path before they set out, and if you are one of those, this is for you.

The book is built as a walk from south to north up the island of Manhattan, following three pavilions in the order the morning light reaches them. You will move through them in sequence, and between them you will pause, twice, for an interlude in my own voice — the stretches of ordinary walking that connect the bright stations, where I tell you the things the pavilions are too kind or too far away to say. After the third pavilion the three speak together, once, as a chorus, to say the things none can say alone. Then I close the book, and there are notes, and a catalogue of plates, and a map. That is the whole architecture. Dawn, walk, heart, walk, horizon, chorus, close.

You will meet the same handful of people the length of the walk, and I want to introduce them properly here, so you recognize them when they come, the way a host tells you a little about the other guests before the party.

Amaranth is the one to watch most closely, because Amaranth changes the most, and the change is the secret engine of the whole book. You will meet them first as the most frightened person in the world, folded small, sure there is no room, almost turning back at the very door. Keep your eye on them. By the gold pavilion they will be unrecognizable — radiant, whole, laughing up into the noon light — and by the end they will have gone off to build a whole new procession somewhere else, the saved become the one who saves. If you read for one thing, read for Amaranth's straightening spine. The whole book is in it.

Rosemary is the oldest, and carries the book's memory. Rosemary keeps a notebook of names: at the front, the names of the ones who came too early, before there was any safe place to stand, the ones the world failed; and slowly, as the seasons turn, a back half begins to fill with the names of the living, the children, everyone who walks the procession and asks to be written down as a life rather than mourned as a loss. Rosemary reads the front-names aloud in the rose dawn so they are not forgotten, and welcomes the back-names with joy. When you wonder what all this cost, and who paid it, look to Rosemary's notebook. The front of it is the price. The back of it is what the price bought.

Tible feeds everyone. That is Tible's whole theology and very nearly Tible's whole character, and it is enough, it is more than enough, it may be the most important job on the island. Tible cooks at the Gathering Arches by one rule only: you are hungry, sit down, eat, and no one is ever asked to prove they deserve it. Watch what Tible's food does to people — to the frightened, to the grieving, even to the ones who wander in meaning to sneer. Tible is the proof of the book's quiet central

claim: that you do not change people by defeating them, you change them by feeding them, that the revolution was always going to be a kitchen.

June and Cass are the love story, though they are also much more. June is a musician for whom music is not a job but a nature; Cass is a gardener the same way, who calls every flower sweetheart and plants slow trees for children not yet born. They meet at the Arches, fall in love across the colors, and marry in the gold of the Meadow, and their love grows into something larger than themselves — June's private love song becomes, without June ever intending it, the anthem the whole island somehow knows. Watch them for the book's argument about love: that love is mostly a verb, mostly things you do, doors held and meals made and gardens planted, and that our love, when the world finally makes room for it, is not a private exception but the common song.

And the children, who are everywhere by the end, running unafraid through gardens planted for them before they were born. They are the future, made small and immediate. They do not carry the frightened face that the first pavilion was built around; it is being unwritten in them, season by season. When you want to know whether any of this is working, whether the long slow labor of holding doors and making room is changing anything at all, look at the children running at the Threshold at a dead sprint, certain it is for them. It is working. They are the proof it is working.

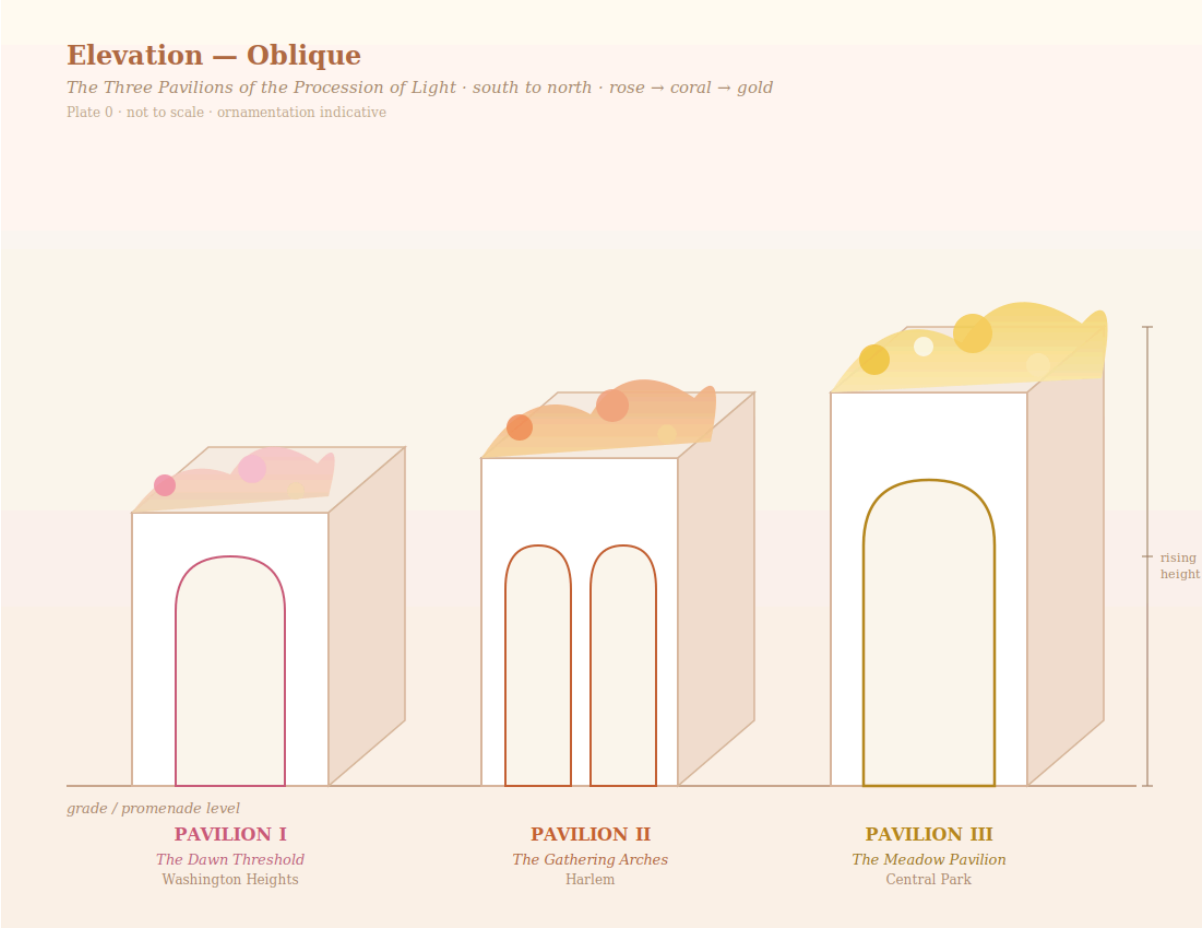
That is the cast and the shape. The light is about to start up the avenue. The first pavilion, the rose one, the doorway, is waiting to speak, and it has been waiting, it tells me, a very long time. Walk north with me now. The day is just getting warm, and there is, I promise you, more room ahead than there ever was behind.

— Surjan

Detail of the baroque ornamentation — the spheres gathering toward celebration

Plate 0 — Elevation–Oblique

The three pavilions of the Procession of Light, drawn in oblique projection and arranged south to north as the reader will encounter them. The structures rise in height and warm in color along the route — rose at the Dawn Threshold, coral at the Gathering Arches, full gold at the Meadow Pavilion — each crowned with its baroque ornamentation and opened by a sheltering arch at promenade level.


Elevation — Oblique
The Three Pavilions of the Procession of Light · south to north · rose → coral → gold
Plate 0 · not to scale · ornamentation indicative
rising height
grade / promenade level
PAVILION I
The Dawn Threshold
Washington Heights
PAVILION II
The Gathering Arches
Harlem
PAVILION III
The Meadow Pavilion
Central Park

PART I

The Dawn Threshold

Washington Heights · rose · the first light · beginnings

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I am the Dawn Threshold, and I will tell you how I woke.

It was a Tuesday, though I did not know the names of days yet. I knew only that I had been longed for, and then that I was. There is not much distance between those two things, longing and being, less than people think. I was longed for so hard and so long by so many that one morning the longing set, the way sugar sets, the way light sets along the top of a building, and I opened my eyes, which are not eyes, and I was standing in Washington Heights with the river on one side of me and the hill rising on the other and the whole pink morning pouring down the avenue toward me like something poured from a pitcher.

I want to tell you what I looked like, because I was proud of it and I am still. I was the color of the inside of a shell. All along my front I was covered in ornament, curls and scrolls and small round forms like pearls, like buds, like the closed fists of flowers that have not decided to open. People who saw me reached for words and the words they reached for were always sweet ones. Sugar, they said. Frosting. Coral. Cake. One child said I looked like the most beautiful thing in the bakery and then would not say which thing, because, the child explained, it was all of them at once. I have never been described more correctly.

But I was not built to be looked at. I want to be clear about that, because it matters. A great deal in this world is built to be looked at and I am not one of those things. I was built to be walked through. I am a doorway. Everything ornamental about me, every curl and pearl and frozen wave of sugar, all of it is only the frame around the opening, and the opening is the point. I am the place where you stop being outside and start being inside. I am the threshold, and I am the dawn, and I am where it begins.

Let me tell you who came through me first.

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Her name was Amaranth, though that morning she would not have told you so. She would not have told you anything. She came up the hill from the train with her shoulders pulled in tight, the way you carry yourself when you have learned that taking up space is dangerous, and she had a bag over one shoulder with everything she owned in it, which was not much, and she had a face I

recognized immediately even though I had never seen a face before, because I had been built by people who had worn that face, and so it was, in a way, written into me. It was the face of someone who has been told, in a thousand small ways and a few enormous ones, that there is no room for them. That they are too much and also not enough. That the door is not for them.

She stopped across the street from me. She did not come closer. She looked at me the way you look at something you are sure is about to be taken away.

I did not say anything. This is the first thing I learned about being a threshold: you do not call. You do not pull. You only stand open, and you stay open, and you let the open be the whole invitation. People who have been hunted do not trust a voice that calls them. But they will, sometimes, trust a door that simply refuses to close.

She stood there a long time. The light came up the avenue and reached her and turned her, briefly, the same rose as me, so that for a moment she and I were the same color, and I think she felt it, because something in her shoulders eased by the smallest amount. Then a man walked past her and said something I will not repeat, the kind of thing that is meant to make a person smaller, and I watched her fold back down into herself, and I watched her almost turn around and go back to the train.

Almost.

But the light was still on her. And I was still open. And maybe that was enough, the light and the open door and nothing pulling at her, no one needing anything from her — maybe a person who has been needed at and grabbed at their whole life can only walk forward when nothing is reaching for them. She crossed the street. She came up my steps slowly, like they might give way. And she stood in my opening, exactly in the center of me, in the exact place where outside becomes inside, and she stopped.

"Is this for me?" she said. Out loud. To a building.

And I broke my own rule, because some questions you cannot leave standing in the air, it would be cruel, and I am not cruel, I was not built by cruel people. I warmed the air around her. I brightened, just slightly, the rose of me. And in the way a warm room says it, in the way a held hand says it, I said:

Yes. It was always going to be for you.

She cried then. Standing in my doorway she put her bag down and she put her hands over her face and she cried the way you cry when you have been holding it for years, when the holding has become a kind of muscle and the muscle finally, finally is allowed to let go. I held the air warm around her the whole time. I did not rush her. Thresholds do not rush. The whole dignity of a

doorway is that it will wait as long as you need, that it does not start counting the moment you arrive, that you may stand in it and fall apart and it will simply remain a door, open, patient, yours.

When she was done she picked up her bag. She wiped her face. She looked back out at the avenue, at the man long gone, at the train she had almost gone back to. And then she did the bravest thing I have ever seen a person do, which was simply this: she walked forward. Through me. Inside.

That was the first one. After that I understood what I was for, and I have never once been bored, because they kept coming, and not one of them was the same, and every single one of them was the bravest thing I had ever seen.

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I should tell you about the inside of me, because Amaranth is inside me now and you should know where she has gone.

People expect, from the sugar and the shell-pink and the ornament, that the inside of me will be small. A doorway is a thin thing, after all. But I am not thin on the inside. This is the secret of every good threshold and it is the secret the people who built me knew in their bones: a true doorway opens onto more room than seems possible from outside. You have felt this. You have stepped into a home that looked modest from the street and found it went back and back, warm room after warm room, more space than the front could promise. That is not architecture. That is love, expressed in architecture. I open onto more room than I should be able to, because the people who longed me into being had spent their lives being told there was no room, and when they built me they built me to be the opposite of that, all the way down.

Inside me it is the color of dawn still but softer, and there are places to sit, and the places to sit are arranged so that no one ever has to sit with their back exposed, because the people who built me knew what it is to need a wall behind you. There is water. There is always water, cool and clean, because they knew thirst, the literal kind and the other kind. And there is, along one wall, a long shelf, and on the shelf there is a notebook, and the notebook belongs to Rosemary.

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Let me tell you about Rosemary.

Rosemary is old. I say this with the enormous respect the word deserves and almost never gets. Rosemary is old enough to remember the time before — before me, before the Arches, before the Meadow, before any safe place stood on this island at all. Rosemary remembers when to be what we are was to be hunted, when the doors of this city were closed one after another in our faces, when a person could be put out of their home and their family and their church and their job for the crime

of being whole. Rosemary remembers friends who did not survive that time. Rosemary remembers their names.

That is what the notebook is. It is a notebook of names. Rosemary comes to me most mornings, early, when the light is just starting up the avenue, and Rosemary sits on the shelf-side and opens the notebook and reads the names. Out loud, quietly, one after another. The names of the ones who did not get a safe place to stand. The ones who came too early, before there was a threshold to walk through, before any island had decided to hold them.

I will tell you something I have never told anyone, not even Surjan, though I suppose Surjan is writing this down so now everyone will know: when Rosemary reads the names, I remember them too. I do not know how. I was not there. I did not exist. But a name spoken aloud inside me becomes, for that moment, a kind of architecture, a small structure in the air, and I hold it, I give it walls and a roof and a place to sit with its back protected, everything that person should have had and did not. I cannot give it to them in life. They are gone. But I can give them a moment of room inside me, and Rosemary knows this, which is why Rosemary comes, and why Rosemary reads, and why Rosemary always says, at the end, closing the notebook: "There's room now. There's room for you now. I'm sorry it's late. But there's room."

The first morning Amaranth stayed — because she did stay, she had nowhere else and I had all the room in the world — she woke early and found Rosemary on the shelf-side reading the names. She did not understand at first. She thought Rosemary was praying, which, I suppose, Rosemary was. She sat down a little distance away and she listened. And when Rosemary got to the end and said the thing about room, Amaranth said, very quietly, "I almost wasn't here. Yesterday. I almost went back."

And Rosemary, who had read a hundred names of people who did go back, or were sent back, or never got to come at all, looked at this living young person sitting whole and breathing in the dawn light, and Rosemary smiled the way the sunrise smiles, all at once and across everything, and said: "But you didn't. Look at that. You didn't."

That was the beginning of Amaranth and Rosemary, and it was the beginning of Amaranth understanding what she had walked into, which was not a building. It was a lineage. It was a long line of people who had longed for room, some of whom got it and some of whom did not, and she was now standing in that line, near the front of it, in the light, alive, with all of it behind her holding her up.

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I want to tell you about the ones who came after Amaranth, because a threshold is not a threshold for one person, a threshold is for everyone, all day, all the mornings.

They came in every kind. They came young, like Amaranth, frightened and folded small. They came old, like Rosemary, carrying their dead and their decades. They came in the middle of their lives having just understood something about themselves at forty, at fifty, that they had spent the whole first half of their life not allowed to know, and those ones often cried the hardest, because they were grieving the years and celebrating the truth both at once, and I held the air warm for them just the same. They came in couples, holding hands, having found each other already and only needing a place that would not make them let go. They came alone. So many came alone. I have a particular tenderness for the ones who come alone, because to walk alone through a door into a room full of strangers when you have spent your life being made to feel like a stranger everywhere — that takes a courage I am not sure has a name.

They came with their hair every color the sky goes. They came in clothes that were armor and clothes that were celebration and sometimes the same clothes were both. They came having traveled across the country, across oceans, having heard a rumor that on a certain island there was a road of pavilions and the pavilions were for us and the door was always open. The rumor was true. I am the door. It is always open. I have never once closed, and I never will, because the moment a threshold closes it stops being a threshold and becomes a wall, and there are enough walls. The whole world is generous with walls. I am here to be the other thing.

There was a person who came who could not speak. Some old grief had taken the words out of them. They stood in my opening the way Amaranth had, exactly in the center, and they could not say "is this for me," they could not say anything, and so I did the only thing I could, I warmed the air and I brightened the rose of me and I said it for them, I said the answer to the question they could not ask: Yes. It is for you. It was always going to be for you. And they put their hand flat against my inner wall, against the sugar and the shell-pink, and they stood like that a long time, palm to the wall, breathing, and when they finally walked inside they were still silent but they were a different silent, a held silent instead of a hunted one, and that, I have learned, is most of what I do. I do not give people their voices back. I am only a door. But I can change the kind of silence a person carries, from the silence of being shut out to the silence of being let in, and those are as different as a closed fist and an open hand.

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The seasons turned. I should tell you I learned the seasons by watching the light change down the avenue, the way it came up earlier and earlier and then later and later, the way it went from the thin gold of winter to the thick honey of summer. Amaranth stayed near me through one whole turning. She did not live inside me forever — that is not what I am for, I am a threshold, you come through me, you do not stop at me — but she stayed in the neighborhood, found a room, found small work, and she came back to me almost every morning the way Rosemary did, and slowly, over that turning of light, I watched her change.

It was not fast. I want to be honest about that, because there are stories that pretend the door fixes you, that you walk through and you are healed, and those stories do a quiet violence to people for whom it was not fast, who walked through the door and were still frightened on the other side, still folded, still flinching. Amaranth walked through me and was still, for a long time, a person who had been taught she was too much and not enough. The door does not undo the teaching. The door only gives you a place to begin the long work of unlearning, with your back protected and water nearby and an old person reading names so you understand you are part of something that goes back and back.

But she did change. I watched her shoulders come down from around her ears, one millimeter a week, until one morning I realized they were simply down, that she was standing at her full height, that she was taking up exactly as much space as she was, no more and no less, which is all any of us is ever asking to do. I watched her start to talk to the others who came through. At first just a nod. Then "good morning." Then, one day, I watched her see a young person standing across the avenue exactly where she herself had stood that first Tuesday, folded small, sure they were about to have something taken away — and I watched Amaranth do the thing that undid me, the thing that told me she had truly come all the way through:

She did not call to them. She did not pull. She had learned that from me, I think, or from being the one who was not pulled. She simply went and stood near me, in the light, where the young person could see her, and she made herself easy to look at, unhurried, unafraid, and she let the young person watch her be safe. She became, for one frightened stranger, the proof. The proof that you could walk through and survive it. The proof that the door was real and the room behind it was real and that you could come out the other side standing at your full height in the rose-gold light.

The young person crossed the street. Of course they did. And Amaranth did not make a fuss of it, she just fell into step beside them at my threshold, and she said the thing, the only thing, the true thing — "It's for you. It was always going to be for you" — and she walked them through.

That was the morning I understood that I am not the only threshold. That every person who comes all the way through me becomes a kind of door themselves, for the next one, and the next, that the whole island is thick with thresholds made of people, and that I am only the first and the most visible, the one made of sugar and shell-pink so you can find it from the train. The real procession is not three pavilions. The real procession is everyone who ever walked through and turned around to hold the door.

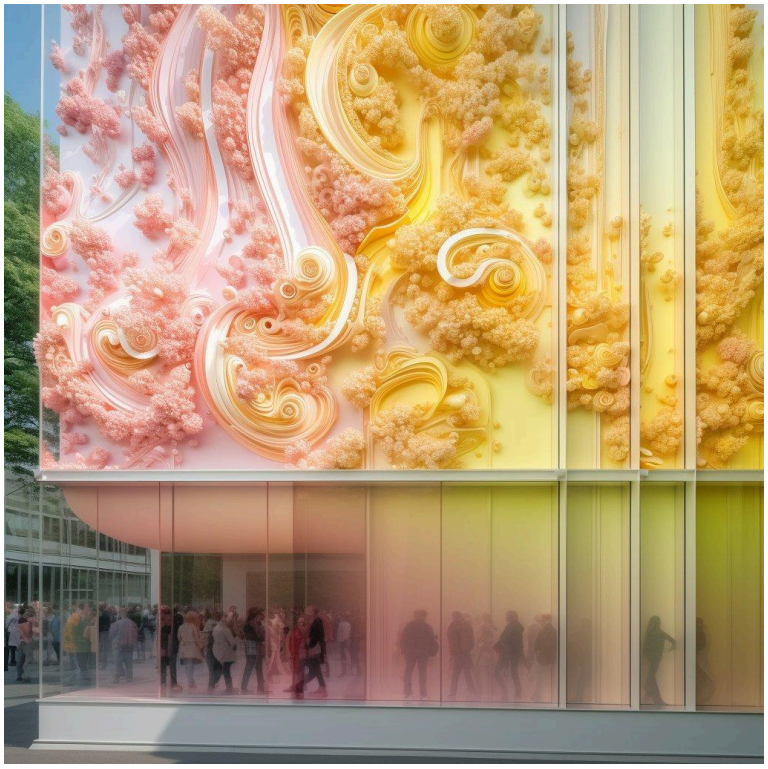

PLATE I · *The Dawn Threshold*

The ornament: "the sugar made to pray"

There is more I want to tell you before I send you north, because a doorway sees a great deal and I have only told you the brightest of it. Let me tell you about the year of the lights, and about the person who came backward, and about the morning the whole neighborhood changed its mind.

The year of the lights began when a child — one of the unafraid ones, one of the ones who run at me at a dead sprint — decided that I was beautiful but too dark at night. The child was right. I am dawn, I am made for the morning, and when the actual morning ends I go a little dim, the way the first rose of the sky fades once the sun is properly up. The child did not like this. The child wanted me bright at night too. So the child, with the seriousness children bring to the things that matter, organized the others, and they strung lights along all my curves and scrolls and frozen waves of sugar, small warm lights, and they turned them on at dusk, and I — I who am made for dawn — found myself glowing rose in the dark for the first time.

I cannot tell you what it did to me to glow at night. Dawn is a promise; it says the day is coming. But to glow rose in the actual dark, when no morning is near, when the night is long and the old fears come out as they always do in the dark — that is a different promise. That says: the door is open even now. Even in the dark. Even at the hour when you are most sure there is no room for you anywhere in the world, the door is lit, and rose, and open, and you can find it from far off, you can find it from the train at midnight, you can find it from inside the worst hour of your worst night, the rose glow up the hill saying come, come, it is open, it is open even now.

People started coming at night after that. The night-comers are different from the morning-comers. The morning-comers are beginning something; they have the dawn-feeling, the fresh-start feeling. The night-comers are usually fleeing something, or enduring something, or simply unable to sleep for the weight of being themselves in a world that has been hard about it. The night-comers do not want the loud festival. They want exactly what I now could give, because of the child and the lights: a rose glow in the dark, a lit door, a warm room with water and a place to sit with your back protected, and Rosemary — who, it turned out, did not sleep much either, the old rarely do — sitting up with the notebook, available, awake, glad of the company. The night shift, Rosemary called it, laughing. The night shift at the Threshold. I have come to think it is the most important thing I do. Anyone can walk through an open door in the morning. To find a lit door in the worst dark and walk through it — that is the deepest use a threshold can be put to, and I owe it entirely to a child who thought I was too dark and decided, with no doubt at all that they had the right, to fix me.

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The person who came backward I have thought about more than almost anyone.

They came down the hill, not up it. From the north. From the direction of the Arches and the Meadow, from the gold end of the island, walking south, toward me, toward the beginning. This is

not how the procession is meant to go. You start at me and walk north into the warming light; you do not start in the gold and walk back down into the dawn. So when I saw a person walking south toward me, against the grain of the whole procession, I did not know what to make of them.

They came and stood in my opening, in the center, in the place where outside becomes inside, the same place Amaranth had stood. But they were facing the wrong way. They had their back to the north, to the gold, to the future, and they were looking south, out, away, at the train, at the way out of the city entirely.

They were leaving. That is what I slowly understood. They had walked the whole procession, gold and coral and rose, they had been to the Meadow and faced the future, and they were leaving the island. Going. Out. And they had come back down to me, to the beginning, to the door, before they went, because — they told me this, standing in my opening, crying the dawn-cry but backward, the leaving-cry — because they wanted to say goodbye to the place where it had begun for them, and because some part of them was not sure they were allowed to leave, was afraid that to walk back out through the door meant they were rejecting all of it, throwing the gift back, that the door only worked one way and once you were inside the island you owed it your staying.

And I had to tell them the truth, which was hard, because I did not want them to go. I am a doorway and I love it when people come through me into the room, and to use myself to send someone back out, away, off the island entirely — that went against my whole grain. But a door that only opens one way is not a door, it is a trap, I told you that already, and I meant it, and so I had to mean it now when it cost me something.

I warmed the air around them. I brightened my rose. And I said, in the way a warm room says it: You can go. The door opens both ways. You do not owe us your staying. You came, you walked the whole light, you took what was yours — and now if your life is elsewhere, if the person you love is in another city, if the work that is yours to do is somewhere else, then go, and go blessed, and go knowing the door stays open behind you. You can always come back. But you do not have to. We did not save you in order to keep you. We saved you in order to free you. Go on. The door opens both ways. That is what makes it a door.

They turned around once, before they left, and looked north, up the hill, at the rose glow and behind it the whole bright procession they were walking away from. And then they walked out, south, toward the train, toward their life elsewhere, and I let them go, and I kept the door open behind them, and I have kept it open ever since, and I will tell you — they came back. Not to stay. Years later, just to visit, with the person they had left to be with, the two of them walking up the hill from the train to show the beloved the place where it had begun. The door opens both ways. That is what makes it a door. I have never been more glad of anything I taught myself than that.

And the morning the neighborhood changed its mind I will tell you quickly, because it is the hope of the whole thing made local and small and therefore believable.

When I first woke, the neighborhood around me was wary. Not cruel, mostly, but wary, the way people are wary of a thing they do not understand that has appeared overnight on their block, pink and strange and full of people they had been taught to be uneasy about. There were complaints. There were petitions. There was a man — there is always a man — who stood across the street and muttered, the way the man muttered at Amaranth, except this man muttered at me, at the whole idea of me, at all the people coming and going through my open door.

I did not argue with him. Doorways do not argue. I simply stayed open, and stayed rose, and let the people come and go, and let the neighborhood watch. And the neighborhood watched. It watched the frightened folded people come up the hill and walk through me and come back out at their full height. It watched the children run at me at a dead sprint, unafraid. It watched Rosemary do the night shift, watched the lights the child strung, watched the festival spill joy down the avenue once a season. And slowly — this is the part that matters, this is the hope made local — the neighborhood changed its mind. Not because anyone argued it into changing. Because it watched joy happen, over and over, on its own block, and joy is more persuasive than any argument, joy is the most persuasive thing there is. The complaints stopped. The petitions stopped. People from the neighborhood started bringing food to the festival, started waving at the night-comers, started, some of them, coming through the door themselves, because it turned out a number of them had been folding themselves small too, all along, and had only needed to watch the door be safe for long enough to believe it might be safe for them.

The man who muttered muttered alone, in the end, and then stopped muttering, because a mutter needs an audience and his audience had gone over to joy. I do not know if he changed his mind. Some do not. But he stopped, and his stopping was its own small victory, and the neighborhood around me now is part of the procession, is one more stretch of the future-garden, planted not by argument but by the slow irresistible persuasion of watching people be happy and safe and loud, over and over, in the rose light, until the watching itself becomes a kind of joining.

That is the hope, made small enough to hold. A neighborhood can change its mind. I watched one do it. If a neighborhood can, an island can. If an island can, a world can. It is slow, and it is local, and it is done not by winning arguments but by being joyful in public until the joy persuades — and I am the door it all begins at, and I have never once closed, and I never will.

Now go north. I have kept you long enough at the beginning. The day is warm and getting warmer. Go.

Interior — the room that goes back and back

Let me tell you about the morning the children came.

I had known children before, of course. Children came through me holding the hands of their parents, those brave parents who had decided their child would grow up in a world with the door already open, who had decided their child would never have to stand frightened across an avenue wondering if there was room. Those children I loved. But the morning I mean is the morning a whole group of them came, a dozen at least, with two or three adults, and they were loud the way only children who have never been taught to be quiet about themselves can be loud, and they came up my steps not slowly, not the way Amaranth had come, but at a run, because no one had ever taught them that a door might not be for them.

I cannot describe to you what that did to me. To be run at by children who had no fear of me. Who assumed, with the total assumption of the young and the cherished, that of course the beautiful pink building was for them, that of course they could go inside, that of course there would be room. They did not ask "is this for me." It would not have occurred to them to ask. They simply came in, and they found the places to sit, and they found the water, and one of them found Rosemary's notebook on the shelf and, not being able to read all the names, asked Rosemary what it was.

I held very still to hear how Rosemary would answer.

Rosemary, who had read those names through grief for years, looked at this child who had never known the grief, who lived already in the world the names had died wanting — and Rosemary did

not bring the grief down on the child. That is a kind of wisdom I am still learning. Rosemary said: "These are the people who built this place. They built it a long time ago, before you were born, by wanting it very very much. And because they wanted it, you get to run inside it. So when you're having fun in here today, that's them. That's them being glad."

The child considered this with the seriousness children bring to the things that matter. Then the child said, "Can I add my name?"

And Rosemary's face — I wish you could have seen Rosemary's face. Every name in that notebook until that moment had been a name of someone gone. A memorial. And here was a living child, whole and loud and unafraid, asking to be written into the same book, not as a death but as a life, not as a loss but as a proof. Rosemary opened the notebook to a clean page, the first clean page after all the names of the dead, and Rosemary said, "Tell me how to spell it," and the child did, and Rosemary wrote it down, the first living name in the book, the first name that was there not because the world had failed them but because the world, on this island, in this light, had finally, finally held.

After that the notebook changed. It is still a book of the dead at the front, and Rosemary still reads those names in the early light, and I still hold them and give them rooms in the air. But now there is a second half, and the second half fills up faster than the first ever did, because every child who comes through me wants their name in the book, and every frightened young person who walks all the way through and turns around to hold the door for the next one, eventually, when they are ready, asks to be written down too. Amaranth's name is in there. She asked to add it the same morning she walked the frightened stranger through. Rosemary wrote it down and then read it back to her, just her name, alone, out loud, inside me, and I gave it the most beautiful room I have ever built in the air, all rose and shell-pink and protected on every side, and Amaranth heard her own name given a safe place to stand, maybe for the first time in her life, and she put her hand against my inner wall the way the silent person had, palm flat to the sugar, and she said, "Thank you for keeping the door open."

I want to be the one to say it, since she thanked me: it was never hard. People imagine it must be hard to keep a door open against the whole weight of a world that wants it shut. And there were forces that wanted me shut, I will not pretend there were not. But keeping open was never the hard part. The hard part was the longing it took to build me in the first place, and that hard part was done by others, long before me, the ones in the front of Rosemary's book. By the time I woke, the only thing left for me to do was the easy and joyful thing, which was to remain. To not close. To stand in the rose light at the top of the island and be the place where it begins. Anyone can keep a door open once it has been built. The miracle is the building, and the building was done by people who never got to walk through.

❦

I am the Dawn Threshold and my section is nearly done, because I am only the beginning and a beginning should not overstay. But before I hand you north, to the Arches and their coral noise, I want to tell you what becomes of the people after they come through me, because that is the part I do not get to see, and it is the part I love most to imagine.

They go on. That is the whole of it and it is everything. They come through me frightened and folded, or grieving and gray, or loud and unafraid, and then they go on, up the island, into the warmer light. I am dawn. I am only dawn. I am the first thin rose of it, the part of the morning that is mostly promise. But the promise is real, and it is kept further north, where the light thickens into coral and the day truly warms, and where, I am told, there is music, and a table, and someone named Tible who feeds everyone, and dancing in a colonnade until the columns sway. I cannot give them that. I am a doorway, not a feast. But I can send them toward it. I can be the place they begin so that they have somewhere to begin from.

Amaranth went north. Of course she did. You knew she would. One spring morning, a full turning of light after that first frightened Tuesday, she came to me early, with Rosemary, and she told me she was going to walk the rest of the procession. She was ready, she said. She had spent enough time at the beginning. She wanted to see what the day became.

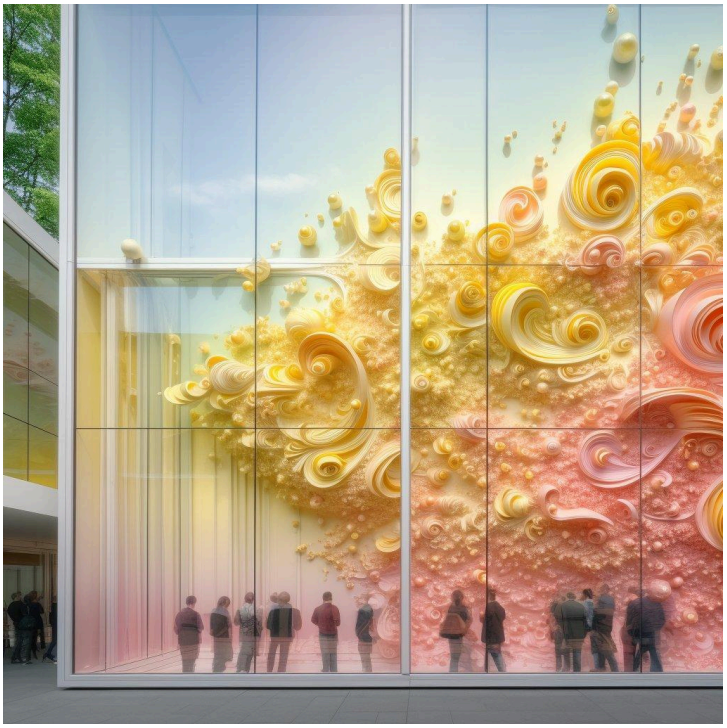
I was glad. I want to be clear that I was wholly, completely glad, with no grief in it at all, because that is what a threshold is for — you are supposed to leave it, you are supposed to go on, a door that you never walk away from is not a door, it is a trap, and I am not a trap. I am the opposite of a trap. So when Amaranth stood in my opening one last time, in the exact center, in the place where outside becomes inside, except this time she was facing the other way, facing north, about to go from inside back out into a world she was no longer afraid of — I warmed the air around her one last time, and I brightened my rose, and I said the only blessing a doorway knows how to give:

Go on. There is more room ahead than there was behind. There always was. Go and find it.

She went. Rosemary stayed with me — Rosemary's work is here, at the beginning, with the names and the notebook and the early light. But Rosemary watched Amaranth go north up the avenue into the thickening morning, and Rosemary said, mostly to the notebook, mostly to all the names in the front of it who never got to go anywhere at all: "Look at that. Look at that. Off they go, into the day. That's for you. All of this is for you."

And the light moved north up the island, the way it does every morning, the way it did the morning I woke, pouring down the avenues like something poured from a pitcher, and it went where Amaranth went, toward the coral and the gold, toward the music and the table and the dancing, toward the future that was waiting and warm and already, already so much brighter than the world had ever promised us it would be.

I am the Dawn Threshold. I am where it begins. Come north. The day is just getting warm.



The Threshold at full height, lit rose against the dark

INTERLUDE — THE WALK FROM THE THRESHOLD

It is me again. Surjan. The pavilions let me step in here, between their voices, because there is a stretch of the walk they cannot tell you about — the stretch in between them, the ordinary blocks of the island where there is no pavilion, only the city, only the walk. The pavilions are the bright stations. But most of a pilgrimage is not the stations. Most of it is the walking in between, and I want to tell you about that, because it is where I learned the thing the pavilions are almost too kind to say.

When you leave the Threshold and walk north toward the Arches, you walk through Washington Heights and into Harlem, and you walk through a city that is not, yet, entirely the bright island the pavilions describe. You walk past people who do not know the procession exists. You walk past a man who says a thing under his breath, the kind of thing meant to make you smaller, the kind of thing that man said to Amaranth that first Tuesday. The pavilions are safe. The walk between them is the world, still mostly the old world, the world that has not yet been planted over with the future-garden.

I used to think this was a flaw in the procession. That the safe places should be everywhere, that there should be no walk between, no stretch where you are exposed. I used to wish the whole island were one continuous Threshold.

But here is what the walking taught me, and I think it is the truest thing in this book, truer maybe than the pavilions themselves: the safe places are not meant to keep you safe forever. They are meant to send you back out stronger. You go into the Threshold frightened and you come out able to walk the next blocks at your full height even past the man who mutters. You go into the Arches unable to be loud and you come out able to sing in the street if you want to. The pavilions are not bunkers. They are not places to hide from the walk. They are places that make you able to walk. The whole point of a safe place is the walk it lets you take afterward.

And the more of us walk the blocks between at our full height, unafraid, the more those blocks themselves begin, slowly, to change. The man who mutters mutters to fewer people each year, because there are more of us walking tall past him, and a mutter only has power over someone who is already folding small. We are planting the future-garden in the streets between the pavilions just by walking them as ourselves. The safe places make us able; the walking does the rest. One day — I believe this, I have to believe this, the Meadow Pavilion has shown me it is true — one day the whole island will be the garden, and there will be no stretch of old world left to walk through, and the pavilions will not be needed as refuges anymore, only kept as the loud beautiful places where we celebrate how far the light has come.

So when you read the Arches next, and they tell you about the loud safe room, remember that the loudness is for the walk. Remember that you are meant to take it with you, back out, into the

blocks that are not yet safe, and to make them a little safer just by being loud and gold and unafraid in them. The procession does not end at the pavilions. The procession is you, walking. Come north.

— *Surjan*

PART II

The Gathering Arches

Harlem · coral · the warm midmorning · the heart

❦

I am the Gathering Arches, and I am loud, and I will not apologize for it.

The Threshold is a quiet thing, a doorway, a held breath. I love the Threshold the way the second hour of a morning loves the first. But I am not quiet, and I was never built to be. I stand in Harlem, coral and peach and warm as the inside of an oven, and I have three great arches across my front like three mouths all open in song, and from sunup to long past sundown there is music inside me, and food, and the particular holy noise of people who have been told all their lives to be quiet about themselves finally, gloriously, being loud.

Let me tell you what loud means, because the world has taught us to hear it as a bad word, and I am here to take it back.

Loud is a child shrieking with laughter because someone has spun them around by the arms. Loud is two old friends finding each other across a crowded room and calling each other's names. Loud is music with a low end you feel in your chest before you hear it in your ears. Loud is a hundred people singing a song they all somehow know the words to even though no one taught it to them. Loud is the sound of safety, is what I have learned. Frightened people are quiet. Hunted people are quiet. The quiet of the world outside is not peace, it is the held breath of people making themselves small. And so when people come through the Threshold and walk north and arrive at me and finally, finally get loud — that is not noise. That is the sound of the held breath being let go. That is the most beautiful sound on the island, and I am made to amplify it, every coral curve of me shaped to catch a laugh and throw it back doubled.

I am the heart of the procession. Hearts are loud. Put your hand on your chest and tell me I'm wrong.

❦

The first thing you need to know about me is Tible, because you cannot understand me without understanding Tible, the way you cannot understand a kitchen without understanding the person who cooks in it.

Tible came to me early, in my first season, before I even fully understood what I was. Tible arrived with a cart. An actual cart, the kind you push, piled with pots and pans and sacks of flour and sugar and bundles of herbs, and Tible pushed this cart up the hill from the train, sweating and swearing and laughing, and pushed it right in through my center arch and stopped in the middle of me and looked around at all my coral warmth and said, out loud, to no one, "Oh, this'll do. This'll do nicely. This is a kitchen if I ever saw one."

And Tible was right. I had not known it about myself until Tible said it, but I am a kitchen, or I have a kitchen in me, or I became one the moment Tible decided I was. Tible set up in my warmest corner, where the morning light pools longest, and Tible began to cook, and Tible has not really stopped since.

I want to tell you about Tible's laugh because it is part of my architecture now, as much as any arch. It comes up from somewhere deep and it arrives all at once and it fills me to my highest curve, and when Tible laughs everyone within earshot laughs too, not at anything, just because a laugh like that is contagious the way warmth is contagious, the way a yawn is, the way safety is. Tible laughs while cooking. Tible laughs while feeding people. Tible laughs when someone tries to refuse food — "Oh, you're not hungry? Sit down anyway, you can watch me eat, that's nearly as good" — and somehow the person ends up eating.

That is Tible's whole theology, and it is mine too, now: that no one who comes through my arches should be hungry. Not for food and not for the other things. Tible feeds the literal hunger with bread and stew and sweet things, with a kind of cooking that has no single country in it because it was built by people from everywhere who found each other here, a cooking that is its own kind of queer, a glorious mixed-up plate that belongs to no tradition and therefore to all of us. And while Tible feeds the literal hunger, I try to feed the other one, the hunger to be in a room full of your own people and not have to explain yourself, not have to brace, not have to translate. Tible's food and my warmth do the same work from two directions. We meet in the middle, in the full belly and the eased shoulders of someone who walked in starving in every sense and is now, simply, fed.

❦

Amaranth arrived at me in the spring, having walked north from the Threshold.

I knew her before she told me her name, the way I know everyone, because the Threshold sends word ahead in the only way a doorway can, which is by the look on a person's face. People who have come all the way through the Threshold arrive at me with a particular face, a face that is still a little surprised to be safe, still checking over its shoulder out of habit even though the habit is no longer needed. Amaranth had that face. But she had something else too, something the Threshold had told me to watch for: she had the look of someone who had already turned around once to hold the door for somebody else. That look is rarer and I treasure it. It means a person has not only received the

safety but begun to make it, and those are the people who become the true architecture of this island, more than I am, more than any of us.

She came in through my left arch, a little shy of the noise. The noise can be a lot at first, for someone fresh from the quiet of the Threshold. I watched her stand at the edge of all my warmth and music and decide whether she could come into the middle of it. And then Tible saw her.

Tible has a sense for the ones standing at the edge. Tible put down a spoon and crossed to her and did not say anything grand, did not make a scene, just held out a small bowl of something warm and said, "You walked up the hill. You should eat. Sit by me, the light's good there." And that was all it took. Amaranth sat by Tible in the good light and ate the warm thing and within an hour she was no longer at the edge of my noise, she was inside it, she was part of it, she was laughing at something Tible said, and her laugh, which I do not think she had used much in her life, came out rusty at first and then, by the second time, a little less rusty, and I caught it in my coral curves and threw it back to her doubled so she could hear what it sounded like, her own joy, and she looked startled, the way people do when they first hear themselves be happy out loud in a safe room.

She stayed near me a long time, the way she had stayed near the Threshold. People do that. They find a pavilion that fits the shape of what they need and they stay near it for a season or a year, doing the slow work. The Threshold gave Amaranth a place to begin. I gave her something harder and sweeter, which was a place to be happy in front of other people. Those are not the same skill. Plenty of people can be safe alone who cannot yet be joyful in a crowd, because joy in a crowd means being seen, and being seen is the exact thing the world taught them was dangerous. My whole work is to make being seen safe. To make a person believe that the eyes on them are warm eyes, glad eyes, that to be looked at can be a blessing instead of a threat. It is slow work and it is loud work and it is, I think, the most joyful work on the island, and I get to do it every single day.

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Now I must tell you about June and Cass, because they fell in love inside me, and it is the best thing I have ever held.

June came to me with a guitar. June was a musician, is a musician, will always be a musician, the kind for whom music is not a thing they do but a thing they are, the kind who taps rhythms on the table without knowing they are doing it. June came up the procession like everyone, through the Threshold and north, and June arrived at me and heard the music already going inside me and just — joined it. Did not ask. Did not stand shy at the edge like Amaranth. June walked in through my center arch, took out the guitar, found the key the room was already in, and started to play along, and the people who were making music looked over, and a person who has been alone with their music their whole life held their breath waiting to be told to stop, to be told it wasn't wanted, to be told the music was too much like everything else about them had always been too much —

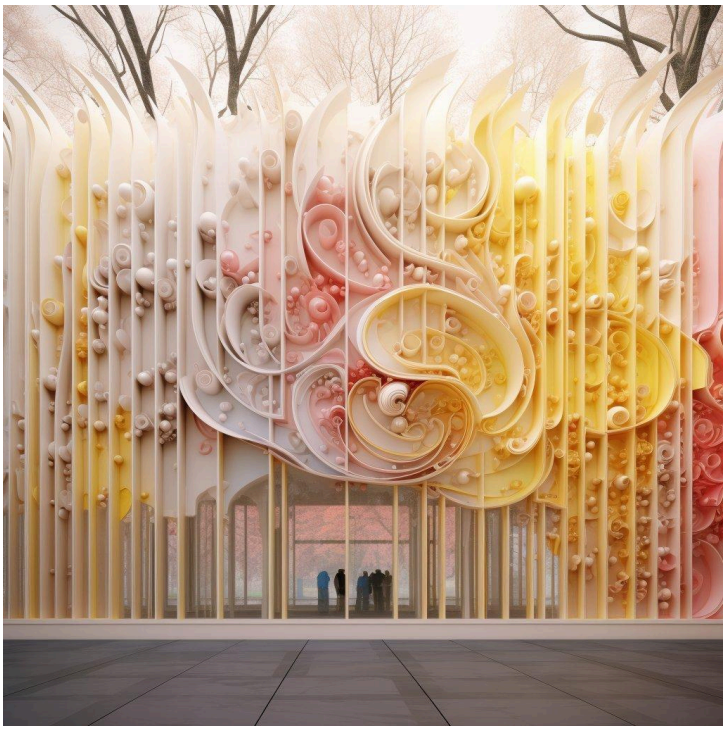
And instead the other musicians grinned and made room. They shifted the key a little to suit the guitar. They built the song bigger to fit the new player in. And June understood, I watched June understand, that here was a place where your music was not too much, where there was room in the song for you, where the song would actually get better for your being in it. June played until their fingers hurt and then played more, and when they finally stopped, late, the room applauded, and June stood there in my coral light holding a guitar and being applauded by a room full of their own people, and June cried, the way Amaranth had cried in the Threshold, except June cried while laughing, which is the particular cry I specialize in, the cry that is mostly joy with just enough grief in it to know how far you've come.

Cass came to me through the garden.

I have not told you about my garden. Along my eastern side, where the coral light is best in the afternoon, there is a strip of earth, and in my first season it was bare, and then Cass came, and now it is not bare. Cass is a gardener the way June is a musician — not as a job but as a nature. Cass came up the procession and arrived at me and did not go for the music or the food, not first. Cass went straight to the bare strip of earth along my eastern side and crouched down and put a hand flat on the soil, the way the silent person at the Threshold had put a hand flat on the wall, and Cass said, "Oh, you poor thing, nobody's planted you," and Cass has been planting me ever since.

What Cass plants is mostly things that flower. Cass says we have enough that is merely useful and not enough that is merely beautiful, and Cass intends to correct the balance, at least along my eastern wall. So in the season I am telling you about, my eastern side went from bare earth to a riot, to coral poppies and pink cosmos and tall gold flowers whose names I never learned because Cass calls them all "sweetheart" regardless, and bees came, actual bees, all the way up into the city to my one strip of flowers, and the whole eastern side of me began to hum, a different music than June's but music all the same.

PLATE II · *The Gathering Arches*



The Arches in full voice, ornament like caught music

I am the Gathering Arches and I am not done, because the heart is never done, the heart keeps going as long as there is anyone to beat for. Let me tell you about Tible's table, and about the all-night, and about the language we made.

Tible's table is not really a table. It is the idea of a table, expressed as about forty tables, plus crates, plus the low coral wall along my western side, plus people's laps, plus the floor, anywhere a person can sit and be handed food. But everyone calls it Tible's table, singular, because it functions as one table no matter how scattered, the one long table that everyone in the world ought to have a seat at and so few do. The rule of Tible's table is the only rule the Arches really has, and it is this: anyone who comes hungry leaves fed, and no one is asked to prove they deserve it. You do not have to be sad enough, or queer enough, or brave enough, or anything enough. You have to be hungry. That is the entire entrance requirement, and hunger is the one thing no one has to fake, so the table is open to all the way down.

I have watched Tible feed people who came to mock. It happens. Someone wanders in meaning to sneer, expecting to find something they can feel superior to, and Tible — who can smell a sneer the way Tible can smell bread about to burn — does not sneer back, does not argue, does not even seem to notice. Tible just puts a bowl of something warm in front of the sneerer and says "you walked in, you must be hungry, eat," and sits down nearby, and the sneerer, who came armored against argument, has no armor against being fed. You cannot stay armored with good warm food in front of you and a person beside you who wants nothing from you but that you eat it. The armor comes off. It always comes off. I have watched dozens of sneerers eat at Tible's table and leave un-sneering, not because anyone won an argument but because no one had one, because Tible offered food instead of a fight, and food, like joy, is more persuasive than argument, they are cousins, food and joy, they do the same patient work.

This is the thing about the heart that the head is always forgetting: you do not change people by defeating them. You change them by feeding them, by being joyful near them, by keeping the warmth up and the door open and the bowl full until the cold thing in them, whatever taught it to be cold, finally thaws. The Threshold persuades a neighborhood by letting it watch joy. I persuade a sneerer by handing them soup. It is the same persuasion. It is the only persuasion that has ever really worked, on anyone, ever. Tible knew it before any of us. Tible has known it the whole time, since the day Tible pushed a cart up the hill and declared me a kitchen. The revolution is a kitchen. The revolution has always been a kitchen. Pull up a crate.

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The all-night happens when a festival will not end.

Most festivals wind down. The light goes, the food runs low, people drift home full and happy. But once in a while — I cannot predict it, it has to do with some alignment of the right music and

the right crowd and the right warmth of the night — a festival refuses to end. The music does not wind down; it changes, goes from the loud joined singing into something deeper and more patient, a music for the long hours, and people do not drift home, they settle in, they find their people and their corners and their laps, and the festival becomes an all-night, and the all-night is, I think, the most tender thing I hold, more tender even than the loudest joy.

Because in the deep hours, when the loud joy has spent itself and the all-night settles into its long murmur, people talk. Really talk. The kind of talking that only happens after midnight among people who feel completely safe, the kind where the old heavy histories come out, gently, into a warm room full of others who have their own heavy histories, so that no one is alone with theirs. The all-night is where the grief that I hold at the quiet edge during the loud festival finally gets to speak, in the deep hours, held by the dark and the warmth and the murmur and the people. I dim my coral to its softest. I keep the warmth up. And I listen to a hundred quiet conversations happening at once all through my arches, people telling each other the things they have never told anyone, being heard, being held, in the safe deep middle of the night.

June and Cass fell deeper in love during an all-night. Not the night they met — they met in the daylight, with the humming, I told you that. But the night they truly fell, the night it went from delight into the deep thing, was an all-night, the two of them settled in among Cass's sweethearts on my eastern side in the deep hours, talking, telling each other the heavy histories, and I watched them hand each other the heaviest parts of themselves and watched the other one not flinch, not leave, only hold it, and that is the moment love goes deep, the moment you hand over the heaviest part and the other one holds it without flinching. I dimmed my coral and kept the warmth up and let them have it. The all-night is for that. The loud festival is the joy; the all-night is the joy's deeper root, the trust, the heavy histories handed over in the dark and held.

Amaranth had an all-night too, the one that changed her, though she did not fall in love that night — her love came later, north of here, and is not mine to tell. But she had an all-night where she finally told her own heavy history, in the deep hours, to Tible and to a few others gathered close, and they held it without flinching, and I held the warmth up, and in the morning she was lighter by exactly the weight of the thing she had finally set down. That is the other thing the all-night does. It is not only for falling in love. It is for setting down the weights, into the keeping of people who will not flinch, in the safe deep dark. People walk out of an all-night lighter. I send them north lighter. The Meadow gets them already partly unburdened, because the deep hours in my arches took some of the weight.

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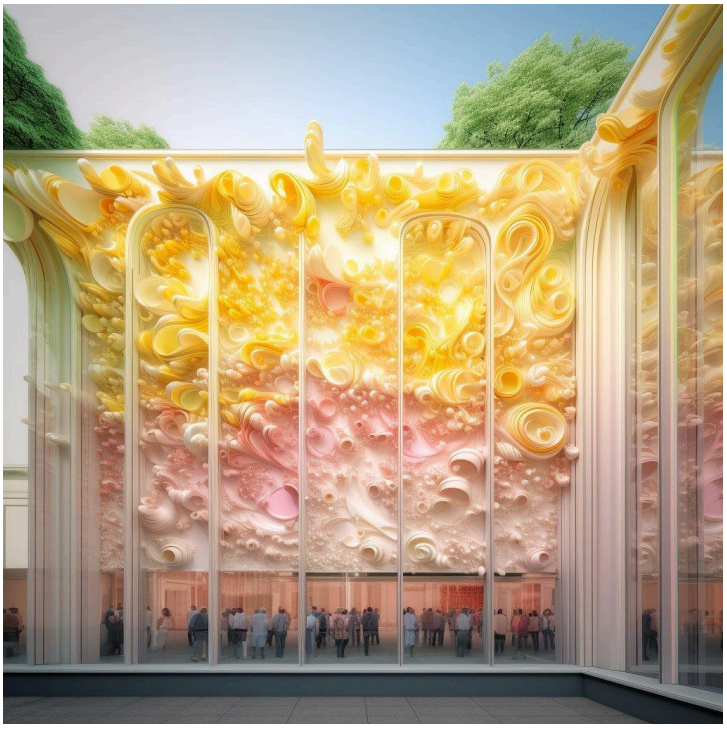
And the language we made I will tell you last, because it is the strangest and most beautiful thing the Arches grew, and no one planned it, it simply happened, the way the best things do.

People who spend enough time in me start to talk differently. Not a code, nothing secret, nothing meant to shut others out — the opposite. A way of talking that is meant to let everyone all the way in. It started with small things. The way Tible calls everyone in to eat. The way Cass calls every flower and eventually every person sweetheart. The way the musicians say "make room" when a new player joins, and how "make room" stopped being only about music and started meaning a hundred things, an entire philosophy in two words: make room, there is room, we will build the song bigger to fit you in. People started saying "make room" for everything. Someone new and shy at the edge of the noise — make room. Someone with a heavy history to set down in the all-night — make room. Someone whose pronoun the world keeps getting wrong — make room, we will get it right, we will build the language bigger to fit you in, the way we build the song bigger, the way I build my arches to catch and double a laugh.

That is the language we made: a way of talking whose deepest grammar is make room. It is the opposite of every language the world had taught us, the languages of too much and not enough, of you don't belong here, of there isn't space for what you are. The Arches grew a language whose every phrase means the same thing the Threshold's open door means, the same thing the Meadow's gold horizon means: room. There is room. We will make more. Come in, sit down, sing along, set it down, we will build it all bigger to fit you in.

I am the Gathering Arches, and I am the heart, and the heart's whole language is make room. Say it with me before you go north. Make room. There is room. There was always going to be room. Now go on — the gold is waiting, and you go lighter than you came, and that is exactly how the heart wanted to send you.



Golden hour on the eastern face — Cass's garden side

June and Cass met, of course they met, everyone who stays near me long enough meets everyone else, that is rather the point of me. But I want to tell you how they met, because it was perfect and I take full credit.

It was late afternoon. June was playing on my western side where the music gathers, and the song June was playing drifted east on the warm air, the way sound moves through me, caught and carried by my coral curves. And it reached the garden, where Cass was on their knees in the dirt talking to the flowers. And Cass, without looking up, without knowing who was playing, started to hum along. Just under their breath. To the flowers. And June, on the far side of me, heard a hum come drifting back along the same air the music had traveled out on, a hum in the exact right key, an answer, and June stopped playing to listen, and the hum stopped too, because Cass noticed the music had stopped, and for a moment I held both of them in my warmth, listening for each other across all my coral length, neither one knowing yet who the other was, only knowing that somewhere in this warm loud safe place there was a person whose music answered theirs.

June got up and followed the hum. Found Cass in the garden, on their knees, dirt to the elbows, surrounded by sweethearts of every color. June said, "Was that you? Humming?" And Cass looked up, squinting into the coral light, and saw a person standing there holding a guitar, and Cass said, "Was that you? Playing?" And that was the entire beginning of it. Two people who had spent their lives being told their particular music was too much, finding out that their music answered each other's. I did not have to do anything else. I just kept the warmth up and the light good and stayed

out of the way, which is, I have learned, most of what love needs from a room: warmth, good light, and the room having the sense to stay out of the way.

They were inseparable after that, in the easy way of people who have found the person their music answers. June played, Cass planted, and in the evenings they would sit together on my eastern side among the sweethearts, June playing quiet now, just for the two of them and the flowers and the bees going home, and Cass leaning against June, dirt still on their hands, and I would hold the warmth steady and dim my coral to its softest evening shade and let them have it, the simple enormous thing the world had tried to tell them they could not have, which was an ordinary evening, in love, unafraid, in a place that was glad to hold them.

Amaranth watched June and Cass fall in love and I watched Amaranth watch them, and I saw something move in her face, some old grief and some new hope both. Because Amaranth had not let herself imagine that, I think. The Threshold had taught her she could be safe. I had taught her she could be joyful in a crowd. But love — being loved, being chosen, building an ordinary evening with another person — that was a further country, and watching June and Cass, Amaranth let herself look at it for the first time, let herself believe it might have a door too, the way everything on this island turned out to have a door. I did not rush her toward it. Love is not something a room should hurry. But I kept the warmth up for her too, and I let her watch, and I let her begin to believe.

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Let me tell you about the festival, because I cannot tell you who I am without telling you about the festival, the way you cannot describe a year without describing its longest brightest day.

Once a season, when the light is at its richest, everyone comes. Not just the ones who stay near me but everyone, up and down the whole procession, from the Threshold and from the Meadow and from all the rooms and lives in between. They pour up the avenues the way the morning light pours, and they fill me past my arches and out into the street, and Tible cooks for days beforehand and for the whole day of, and June gathers every musician on the island and they make a noise you can hear, I am told, from across the river. The festival has no single reason. It is not anyone's birthday or anniversary, or rather it is everyone's, it is the birthday of the whole idea that we get to be here, loud and fed and in love and unafraid, on this island, in this light.

The first festival I held, I did not know it was coming. Tible simply started cooking more than usual, and then much more, and then I understood something was building. And on the day, they came, and they kept coming, and I have never been so full, my arches packed, my garden full of people sitting among Cass's sweethearts, my whole coral length ringing with music and laughter and the particular holy noise. And in the middle of it, at the peak of the light, the music came together into one song that everyone somehow knew, the way crowds of us always somehow know the same

songs even when no one taught them, as though the songs are written into us the same way the frightened face was written into the Threshold —

— and everyone sang. Everyone. Hundreds of voices, in my coral arches built to catch and double sound, so that the singing came back on itself and built and built until it was not hundreds of voices anymore but one enormous voice, the voice of all of us at once, and I caught it and I threw it up out of my highest arch into the sky over Harlem, the joined loud unashamed voice of every person who had ever been told to be quiet about themselves, finally singing, finally loud, finally heard all the way across the river and maybe further, maybe all the way to wherever the people in the front of Rosemary's notebook had gone, so that they could hear it too, so that they could know it had been worth the longing, that the room they built had filled, that we were loud now, we were so gloriously loud.

Rosemary came to that first festival. Rosemary almost never leaves the Threshold, but Rosemary came north for the festival, with the notebook, and Rosemary stood in my center arch in the middle of all the noise and the singing, holding the book of names, and Rosemary read them. Quietly, under the enormous singing, the way Rosemary always reads them, one after another, the names of the ones who came too early. Except this time the names were not read into the quiet of dawn but into the loudest joy the island had ever made, and I caught Rosemary's quiet reading the same way I caught the singing, and I wove them together, the names of the dead and the song of the living, so that they rose up out of my highest arch as one sound, grief and joy entirely braided, indistinguishable, which is, I have come to believe, what they always were, what they always will be. You cannot have the one without the other. The joy is this loud because the grief was this deep. The song is for the names. The names are why we sing.

Amaranth sang at that festival. I want you to know that. The same person who arrived at the Threshold so frightened she could barely lift her eyes, who came to me too shy to enter the noise, who heard her own rusty laugh thrown back at her and was startled by it — that same person stood in my coral light at the peak of the festival and sang at the top of her lungs, full height, taking up exactly as much space as she was, her voice one of the hundreds becoming one, and when the song ended she was breathless and laughing and crying all at once, the full braid of it, and Tible appeared beside her with something sweet to eat and said, "There you are. There you finally are," and Amaranth understood that she had arrived somewhere, not a place but a state, the state of being fully and loudly herself among her own people, which is the thing I am built to deliver and the thing I am proudest of in all the world.

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I am the Gathering Arches and I am loud and I am the heart, and I want to tell you the hard thing too, because a heart that only tells you the easy things is not a heart you can trust.

Not everyone who comes through my arches is only joyful. Some come carrying things too heavy for the music to lift right away. Some come having lost people — to the old griefs, to the violences the world still does to us, to the ordinary terrible losses everyone suffers and the particular

ones that fall harder on people like us. And the festival, the singing, all my loud warmth — it does not erase those things. I want to be honest. A pavilion that pretended to erase grief would be lying, and I was not built by liars. The people who built me had too much grief of their own to build a place that pretended grief away.

What I do instead is hold the grief in the warmth. I make a place where you can be sad without being alone with it, where you can sit in the loud joyful room and not feel the joy as an insult to your sadness but as a kind of company for it. Tible knows this. When someone comes carrying the heavy thing, Tible does not tell them to cheer up. Tible feeds them and sits with them at the edge of the noise, close enough to feel the warmth, far enough to not be forced into the brightness, and Tible lets the joy of the room be a thing that happens near the grieving person until, in their own time, they are ready to move a little closer to it. Some days that is all I am: a warm loud room with a quiet edge, where you can bring your grief and not have to choose between it and the company. That is its own kind of safety, maybe the deepest kind. The Threshold makes a place safe to enter. I make a place safe to feel everything in, the joy and the grief both, in front of others, held.

June wrote a song, once, for a person who did not survive. A young person who had been at the festival the season before and was not there for the next one, lost to one of the violences I will not name because naming it gives it room I would rather give to the living. June wrote the song and played it at the next festival, in the middle of all the joy, and it was a grief-song, slow and coral-dark, and the loud room went quiet to hear it, the only time I ever go quiet, and everyone held the grief together for the length of the song. And then — this is the part that taught me what I am — when the song ended, the room did not stay quiet. It got loud again. On purpose. Defiantly. Because the best thing a room full of grieving people can do for the one they lost is refuse to let the grief have the last word, is insist on the joy precisely because the world tried to take it, is sing louder for the silence that was forced on them. The loudness after June's grief-song was the loudest I have ever been, and it was entirely for the dead, and it was entirely joyful, and there is no contradiction in that, there never was, the joy is the grief turned all the way around to face the light.

❦

Amaranth went north, in the end, the way everyone does. The way the Threshold sent her to me, I sent her on to the Meadow.

She was ready. I knew it the way the Threshold had known it, by a change in her face. She had arrived at me still checking over her shoulder, still a little shy of the noise, still unable to imagine love for herself. And the season I sent her on, she was none of those things. She entered the noise without hesitating. She sang at full height. And she had begun, watching June and Cass, to believe that an ordinary unafraid evening of love might have a door for her too — not yet found, but believed in, which is the necessary first step, the Threshold-step of the heart.

She came to me on her last morning with June and Cass and Tible all there to see her off, and the four of them stood in my center arch in the good light, and Tible pressed food into her hands for the walk, "you can't walk to the Meadow on an empty stomach, what kind of place do you think I run," and June played her a few bars of something bright, and Cass gave her a cutting from the garden, a little sweetheart to plant wherever she ended up, "so there's something blooming where you are." And Amaranth held the food and the music and the flower, and she looked around at all my coral warmth one last time, and she said, "I didn't know it could be like this. I want to say that out loud before I go. I didn't know it could be like this, and now I do, and I'm taking it with me."

And I, who am loud, who am the heart, who do not do quiet except for grief-songs, did a quiet thing for her on her way out: I dimmed my coral to its softest, warmest shade, the evening shade, the shade I save for June and Cass among the flowers, and I held her in it for a moment, all that warmth gone gentle, and I said, in the way a warm room says it: You're taking it with you because it was always yours. We didn't give you anything. We just had room enough for you to find what was already there. Go on north. The light's about to go gold. You've earned the gold.

She went. And the light moved north with her, up off the coral into the full gold of noon, toward the Meadow at the edge of the park where the buildings give way to grass and sky, toward the oldest and wisest of us, toward the pavilion that does not look back at the morning but forward at the future, the bright laughing future, the one we are all walking into, the one that was always going to have room.

I am the Gathering Arches. I am the heart of the island and the heart is loud. Come north, but come hungry — Tible will want to feed you before you go.

The gathered crowd — a festival day at the Arches

INTERLUDE — THE WALK FROM THE ARCHES

Surjan again. One more stretch of walking to tell you about, the walk from the Arches down into the park, toward the Meadow and the gold.

This walk is different from the first one. The first walk, from the Threshold to the Arches, is a walk through the old world, the muttering blocks, the city that does not yet know. But the walk from the Arches to the Meadow is a walk into the green. The buildings start to let go. The avenues open. You can feel the park before you see it, a change in the air, a loosening, the city exhaling. And the people you pass on this walk are different too, because you are nearer the Meadow now, nearer the gold, and the procession has thickened the green end of the island with our own kind, so that by the time you are walking the last blocks toward the park you are walking among us, more and more of us, until the walk itself feels like the festival spilling out into the streets.

I want to tell you what I think about on this walk, every time, because it is the thing I most want to leave with you before the Meadow takes over and shows you the future.

I think about how I almost did not get to take this walk at all.

I will not tell you my whole history. It is mine, and some of it is heavy, and this is a book of radical joy and I will not hand you the heavy parts when the joy is the truer thing. But I will tell you that there was a time, before I found the procession, before I sat on that bench in Washington Heights and the Threshold spoke to me, when I did not believe there was a walk like this anywhere in the world for someone like me. When I believed the muttering blocks were the whole island and the whole world, all the way to the water, in every direction, forever. When I had folded myself so small that I was not sure I was still there at all.

And then I took the walk. By accident, the way I told you in the foreword, just walking north because I could not write. And the walk saved my life. Not in a flash. Not in a single golden moment of being spoken to by a pink building, though that happened too. It saved my life slowly, the way the pavilions save everyone slowly, by giving me first a door, then a loud safe room, then a meadow and a future to face — and in between, the walks, the blocks where I learned to carry the safety with me, where I learned that I was able now, that I could walk tall past the mutter, that the folding-small was a thing I had been taught and could, with help and time and gold light, unlearn.

So this walk, the walk to the Meadow, is the walk where I forgive the world a little. Not all the way. The world does not get all the way forgiven; it has not earned it; the front of Rosemary's notebook is too long for all-the-way forgiveness. But a little. On this walk, with the green coming and our own kind thickening around me and the gold waiting ahead, I can hold the heavy history in one hand and this bright walk in the other, the full braid the Arches taught me, and I can feel them

both be true, and I can keep walking north anyway, toward the future, which is the only direction that has ever helped.

The Meadow will tell you the rest. It faces the future and I do not, not the way it does; I am only a person, and I face mostly backward, the way people do, toward where I have been. But I have learned from the Meadow to turn around, every so often, and look north, and let the gold warm the years behind me. That is the gift of the third pavilion and I will let it give the gift itself.

Come north. Almost there. The green is coming. Can you feel it? The city is exhaling. So can you. So can you now.

— *Surjan*

PART III

The Meadow Pavilion

Central Park · gold · the full noon · the portal to the future

I am the Meadow Pavilion, and I am gold, and I am the one who looks ahead.

The others have told you where it begins and where the heart of it beats. The Threshold is dawn, the first rose promise. The Arches are the coral heart, loud and fed and full of love. I am what comes after the heart, which is the horizon. I stand at the northern edge, where the buildings of the island finally let go and the land opens into grass and water and sky, into the great green breathing room of the park, and I am gold, full gold, the gold of noon when the day has entirely arrived and decided, with the whole sky as witness, to stay.

I am the oldest of us in spirit, though we all rose in the same season. I think it is because I face the way I face. The Threshold faces the train, the arrivals, the past a person is walking out of. The Arches face inward, into their own warm crowd. But I face north and up and out, into the open, into what is coming, and a thing that spends all its time looking at the future ages differently than a thing that looks at the door or the dance floor. I have a long view. I will try to give it to you gently, because the long view, handed over too fast, can frighten a person. But handed over warm, the way Surjan hands everything over, the long view is the most hopeful thing there is.

Here is the long view, since you have walked all this way to receive it: it gets better. Not in the thin way people say it to children to quiet them. In the true way. I have looked as far ahead as I can see, and the future that is coming for people like us is bright, and it is wide, and it is full of grass and gold light and room, so much room, more room than the ones in the front of Rosemary's notebook could have dared to dream when they were doing the longing that built the Threshold. It gets better. I have seen it. I am, in fact, a door onto it. Walk through me and look.

Cass built my meadow, so I will start with Cass, though Cass came to me late and only after the Arches.

You know Cass from the Arches — the gardener, June's beloved, the one who calls every flower sweetheart. Cass came north to me eventually the way the truest gardeners always come to the most open ground, drawn by the bare possibility of it. Because where the Arches gave Cass one strip of earth along an eastern wall, I gave Cass a meadow. The whole northern edge of me opens onto

ground, real ground, park-ground, and Cass took one look at it and made the sound a gardener makes when they see more earth than they can plant in one lifetime, which is a sound of pure delighted greed, and Cass said, "Oh. Oh, now we're talking. Now we're really talking."

What Cass planted in my meadow is not like the riot on the eastern wall of the Arches. Cass planted my meadow for the future, which is to say Cass planted things that take years, that a gardener plants knowing they may not see the full glory of, trees and slow perennials and bulbs that multiply quietly underground and come up thicker every spring. Cass planted my meadow the way the ones in the front of Rosemary's notebook built the Threshold: as a gift to people not yet arrived. "I won't see this the way it'll look," Cass told June, planting a tree that would not give real shade for twenty years. "Somebody else will sit under this. Some kid who isn't born yet. That's the whole point. You plant for the kid who isn't born yet." And June, who understood this in their music the way Cass understood it in the dirt, kissed Cass on the top of their dirt-smelling head and said, "Play me the long song, then," and started, right there in my gold meadow, to work out a piece of music that would also take years, that they would add to season after season, a slow song for a slow garden, a thing built for the future on purpose.

That is what my meadow is. It is the future, planted. Every time someone walks through me and out into the grass, they are walking into a garden that was made for them before they came, by people who knew they were coming even though they had never met. And when those people, in their turn, plant something, or sing something, or simply sit under a tree and are happy, they are making the next stretch of future for the next ones not yet arrived. The meadow grows north. It does not stop at my edge. Cass keeps planting it further out every year, and I have come to believe it will not stop until the whole island, and then who knows, is grass and gold light and room.

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And now I will tell you about Amaranth arriving at me, because this is the part the whole book has been walking toward, and I get to be the one to tell it, and I have been looking forward to it since the first page.

She came up out of the last of the coral into my gold one full year and more after she first stood frightened across an avenue from the Threshold. I knew her before she arrived, the way we all know everyone, by word sent ahead. But the word the Arches sent ahead about Amaranth was not a warning to watch for a frightened face. The word the Arches sent was: here comes one who has bloomed. Watch. You're going to love this one.

And I did. I do.

She walked into my gold light and she did not stop at the edge the way she had stopped at the edge of the Arches' noise, the way she had stopped frightened across the avenue from the

Threshold. She walked straight into the middle of me, into the fullest gold, and she stood there, and she lifted her face up into the light — she who had once been unable to lift her eyes at all — and she let the gold pour down on her, and she laughed. Just from the pleasure of it. The pleasure of standing in golden light in a safe place at the warm height of the day, fully herself, taking up exactly her own space, afraid of nothing.

I have held many beautiful moments. I am built to face the future and the future is made of moments like this one, so I have a connoisseur's eye for them. And I will tell you that Amaranth standing in my gold light laughing up at the sun is among the most beautiful things this island has ever shown me, not because it was dramatic — it was not, it was very quiet, just a person being happy in the light — but because of the distance it had traveled to happen. I knew where she had started. The Threshold had told me, and the Arches had told me, and so I could see, layered under the laughing golden person in front of me, the frightened folded person who had almost gone back to the train. To see both at once, the start and the arrival, the fear and the joy, the whole distance of it standing in a single laughing body in the noon light — that is the long view turned to look at one person, and it is almost too much to bear, in the best way, the way the most beautiful things are almost too much to bear.

She planted Cass's cutting that day. The little sweetheart the Arches had sent her off with, the one Cass had given her so there would be something blooming where she ended up. She had carried it north and kept it alive, and she planted it in my meadow, at the edge where the gold light is best, and Cass — who was there, who is always there in the meadow — knelt down beside her to help, and the two of them put the little flower into the future-garden together, and Cass said, "There. Now you're planted here too. Now there's something of you blooming where the kids who aren't born yet will sit." And Amaranth, kneeling in the dirt in the gold light beside the gardener who had given her the flower, understood that she had not just arrived somewhere. She had become part of the place. She was planted now. She was the garden too.

❦

I want to tell you what it is to be a portal, since that is the thing I am that the others are not, and you have walked all this way and earned the explaining.

The Threshold is a door you walk through to get inside. I am a door you walk through to get further. When you stand in my northern opening and look out, you do not see a room. You see the meadow, and past the meadow the park, and past the park the rest of the island, and past the island — if you look the way I have learned to look, the long way, the way that takes years to learn — you see the future. Not a vision, nothing so dramatic. You see, simply, that there is more. That the procession does not end at me. That north of me is more grass and more light and more room, and

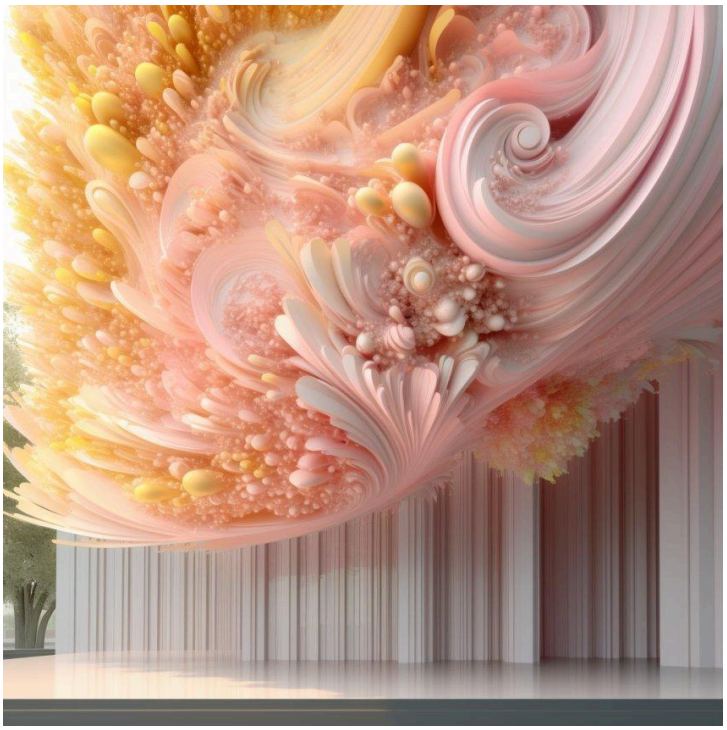
people walking into it, generations of them, each one planting the garden a little further out for the ones behind.

That is what I show people. I stand them in my gold opening and I let them look north and I let them feel, in the warmth and the light and the open green, the truth of it: that they are not at the end of anything. That they are near the front of a line that goes forward as far as the line behind them goes back. Rosemary's notebook has a front full of the dead and a back filling up with the living, and standing in my opening you can feel the back of that notebook stretching forward into pages not yet written, names not yet born, children who will run through a Threshold one day with no fear at all because the fear will have been planted out of the world like a weed, season by season, by people like Cass, like June, like Amaranth, like you.

A person stood in my opening once, an older person, near Rosemary's age, one of the ones who came to their truth late, at fifty, at sixty, having spent most of a life not allowed to know themselves. They stood in my gold opening and looked north at the meadow and the future-garden, and they were quiet a long time, and then they said, with a grief I will not pretend was not real, "I'm glad it's coming. I'm glad it's coming for them. I just wish it had come for me. I wish I'd had this when I was young." And I did the only true thing I could do, which was not to argue them out of the grief, because the grief was right, it should have come for them when they were young, the world failed them and that failure was real and deserved its grief. But I warmed my gold around them and I said, in the way a warm room says it: It came for you now. Now is not nothing. You are standing in it now. And every season you stand in it now, you make it come a little earlier for the next one. The young person who won't have to wait — that's partly you. You're planting that, just by being here, just by being whole at last in the light. The grief is true. And so is this. You can hold them both. I hold them both for you.

The older person stood in my gold a long while. And then they did something I treasure: they took out a small notebook of their own — they had started one, in imitation of Rosemary, a back-of-the-book of the living — and they wrote down their own name in it, late, at sixty, the first name in their book, themselves, a life and not a loss. And then they walked out into the meadow, into the future-garden, and they sat down under one of Cass's slow trees, the one that will not give real shade for twenty years, and they sat in the thin young shade of it, the shade that was mostly promise, and they were, for that golden afternoon, simply happy. Late. But not too late. Now is not nothing.

PLATE III · *The Meadow Pavilion*



The ornament cresting like a wave of light

I am the Meadow Pavilion and I face the future, and there is more of the future to show you, because the future is large and I have only shown you its nearest, warmest edge. Let me tell you

about the winter, and about the ones who come back gold, and about what I see when I look as far north as I can see.

People do not expect me to tell them about winter. I am gold; I am noon; I am the warm horizon. Surely, they think, the Meadow has nothing to do with winter. But I face the future, and the future has winters in it, every future does, and a pavilion that only knew summer would be no use to anyone in the cold. So I will tell you the truth about my winter, which is the truest hopeful thing I know.

In winter my meadow goes brown and bare. Cass's future-garden, all those slow trees and patient perennials and bulbs multiplying underground — in winter you would not know it was there. The grass dies back. The slow trees go skeletal. A person walking up through the snow to stand in my gold opening and look north sees, in winter, not a garden but a brown empty field, and the gold of me looks thin against the gray sky, and the whole bright procession can feel, in the deep of winter, like something half-imagined, like a summer that is never coming back.

And here is what I have learned to say to people in the winter, the hardest and most important thing I say all year: it is still there. The garden. Everything Cass planted. It is all still there, under the brown and the snow, doing the slow patient work that gardens do in winter, which is not nothing, which is the opposite of nothing, which is the most important work of all — the roots are going down. In the winter the garden does not grow up where you can see it. It grows down, into the dark, into the cold ground, deeper, anchoring, getting ready. The bulbs are multiplying underground exactly when the surface looks deadest. The slow trees are putting their roots down further in the cold than they ever do in the warm. The winter is not the absence of the garden. The winter is the garden doing its deep dark necessary work where you cannot watch it.

I tell people this in their own winters too, because everyone has them — the seasons when the joy goes brown and bare, when the loud festival feels half-imagined, when a person stands in their own life and sees only the empty field and cannot believe the garden was ever real. And what I say to a person in their winter is what I say to the meadow: it is still there. Everything you grew in the warm seasons is still there, under the brown, doing the deep work. You are not back at the beginning. You are not empty. You are wintering, which is a thing the garden does on purpose, a thing that makes the spring possible, a thing where the roots go down precisely because the surface has gone quiet. Hold on. The gold comes back. I have seen every winter on this island turn, every single one, into spring. The garden has never once failed to return. Yours will not either. It is still there. The roots are going down. Hold on.

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The ones who come back gold are my favorite thing to watch, and I have saved them for near the end on purpose.

I told you, back at the beginning of my telling, that the Threshold sends people north to the Arches and the Arches send them on to me, and that is the procession, dawn to coral to gold. But the procession has a secret second motion that the Threshold, facing south toward the arrivals, cannot see, and that the Arches, facing inward toward their own crowd, do not fully see either. Only I can see it, because I face north and out, and so I am the one who watches people leave — walk past me, out of the gold opening, into the meadow and the park and the rest of their lives north and beyond.

And I watch them come back.

Not all of them. Some go out into the future-garden and on into their lives and I never see them again, and that is right, that is good, the door opens both ways, we did not save them to keep them. But many come back. Seasons later, years later, they come back up the procession, and they are different, and the difference is the most beautiful thing I get to see: they come back gold. They left as people who had received the gold — who had stood in my light and felt the future warm them. And they come back as people who make the gold, who carry it, who are themselves now a kind of noon for whoever is near them. They went out as the cherished and they come back as the cherishers. They went out having been given room and they come back making room, the way the Arches taught, the way the whole island runs.

Amaranth came back gold. Of course she did. You knew she would. She went out from my meadow having bloomed, having planted her sweetheart in the future-garden, radiant and whole — and she came back, seasons later, leading. Bringing others. Walking up the procession not as a pilgrim now but as a guide, with a little cluster of frightened folded new ones around her, the way she had once been frightened and folded, and she walked them up through the rose and the coral and into my gold, and she stood them in my opening to look north at the future, and she said to them what had once been said to her, the whole long view handed over warm: it gets better, I promise, look, look north, that's coming, that's for you, it was always going to be for you.

She had become the procession. That is the secret second motion, the one only I can see from where I face: the people the procession saves become the procession. The road is not the three of us, the Threshold and the Arches and me. The road is everyone who ever walked it and turned around to walk the next ones up. Amaranth is the road now. Rosemary is the road. June and Cass and Tible are the road. The children running unafraid in my future-garden will be the road. And you, when you have walked it — you will be the road too, for someone, somewhere, whether or not there is a pavilion there to help you, because you will have learned the only thing the pavilions really teach, which is how to make room, how to hold a door, how to be gold for someone in their dawn.

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And what I see when I look as far north as I can see, I will tell you last, and then I will let you go, because you have walked a long way and the telling should not outlast the walk.

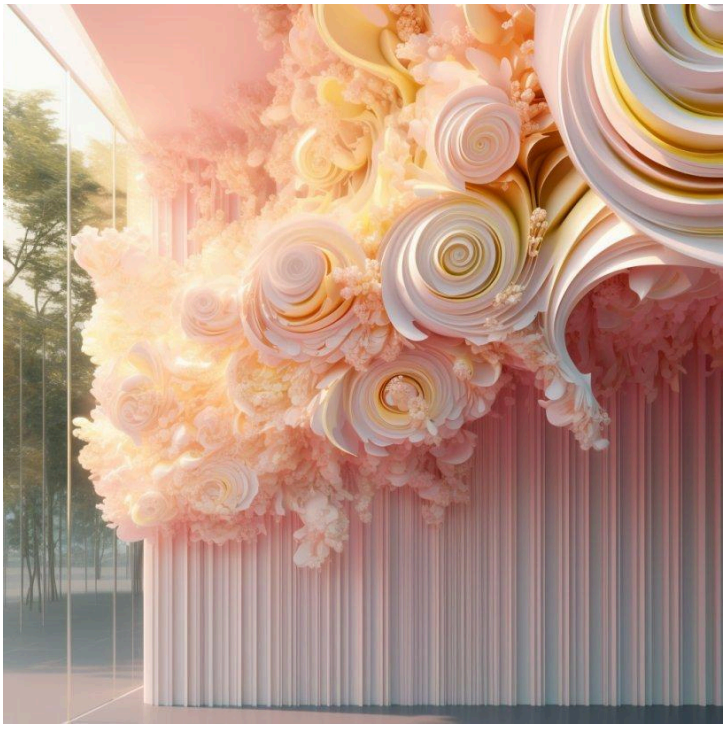
When I look north, past the meadow, past the park, past the future-garden Cass keeps extending every year, past the edge of even what Cass has planted — I see the island change. Slowly, over a long time, longer than one life, but I see it, because I am built to see far. I see the muttering blocks go quiet, the way the neighborhood around the Threshold went quiet, not by force but by the slow irresistible persuasion of watching joy until the watching becomes joining. I see the stretches of old world between the pavilions get planted over, season by season, with the future-garden, until there is no stretch of old world left to walk through, until the whole island is the garden, until the pavilions are no longer needed as refuges and stand instead as what they would most love to be: not shelters from a hard world but monuments in a kind one, beautiful loud gold places where a people that is no longer hunted gathers simply to celebrate how far the light has come.

I see children who will never know the frightened face. I see the front of Rosemary's notebook, the long list of the ones who came too early, finally answered — not erased, never erased, always read, always held, always grieved — but answered, by an island and then a world where no more names need be written in that front part ever again, where the whole book is the back part, the living part, the part that got to stay.

I see, as far north as I can see and then a little further by faith, a future so bright and so wide and so full of room that I cannot make out its edges, and walking into it, laughing, unafraid, gold, are all of us — the ones who built the Threshold by longing, the ones who walk the procession now, the children not yet born, and you, you who have read all the way to here, walking into the bright future that was always, always going to have room for you.

That is the long view. I have handed it to you as warm as I know how. Now go north, out of my gold opening, into your own life, and carry the gold with you, and be a noon for someone in their dawn, and plant a little of the future wherever you are, for the ones not yet here.

I am the Meadow Pavilion. I have seen the future and it is for you. Welcome home. You made it. There was always going to be room.



Light made architecture — the future-garden beyond

June and Cass were married in my meadow, and I will tell you about it, because it was the brightest day I have held, and because of what it meant.

They did not have to be married. I want to say that plainly. No one on this island needs a ceremony to make their love real; the love is real because it is love, and the island holds it because the island holds all of us, married or not, partnered or not, alone or in love or somewhere lovely in between. June and Cass were not made more real by the marrying. But they wanted it. They wanted to stand up in the gold light in front of everyone they loved and say the thing out loud, because saying the true thing out loud in front of your people, in a safe place, in the warm light — that is its own joy, and joy needs no further justification than itself. They wanted to be loud about their love, the way the Arches taught everyone to be loud, and where better to be loud about a love built for the future than in me, the pavilion of the future, the gold portal, with the whole meadow they planted together stretching north behind them.

Everyone came. The whole procession emptied itself north for the day, the way it does for the festival. Rosemary came up from the Threshold with the notebook. Tible came up from the Arches and cooked in my gold light for two days and would not hear a word about resting. And Amaranth — Amaranth stood up beside June and Cass as the one who held the rings, the place of highest honor, because by then Amaranth was as close to the two of them as family, was family, the family you find and choose, which the people on this island know is every bit as real as the other kind and sometimes a good deal more loving.

June played at their own wedding. Of course June did. June had finished, for the occasion, the long song begun in the Arches' garden and added to season after season, the slow song for the slow garden, and June played it through whole for the first time, all the seasons of it at once, and it was a song about building something for the future out of love, which was exactly what June and Cass had been doing all along in the dirt and the music both, so that the song and the marriage and the meadow were all finally revealed to be the same thing, one long act of planting for the ones not yet arrived. And Cass cried, dirt under their nails even at their own wedding because Cass had been planting that very morning, unable to stop, "the future doesn't take the day off just because I'm getting married." And the whole gold meadow of people cried and laughed in the full braid of it, and I poured my brightest gold down over all of them, the most light I have ever made, every gold curve of me blazing, because this was the thing, this was the whole thing, this was what the Threshold opened its door for and what the Arches got loud for and what I face the future to find: two people of our own kind, standing in the open light, unafraid, in love, surrounded by their found family, planting a garden for children not yet born. If you had told the names in the front of Rosemary's notebook that this day was coming, they might not have survived the hope of it. But it came. I held it. It was real. I was there.

When June and Cass said the true thing out loud, the whole meadow got loud the way the Arches taught them, loud as the festival, loud as the joined voice that rises out of the highest arch, and I caught all that gold loudness and I sent it north, out over the meadow and the park and the future-garden, north into the open where the future is, so that the children not yet born might somehow feel it coming toward them across the years, the sound of a wedding in the gold light, the sound of their world being made safe and bright before they ever arrive in it.

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And now the children, because I promised you the children, and because they are the future I face, made small and immediate and running across my meadow shrieking with a joy that has never once been taught to be quiet.

They come to me now in numbers. The ones born to the brave parents, the ones who will grow up never having stood frightened across an avenue, never having folded themselves small, never having wondered if there was room — because they will have always known there was room, will have run through the Threshold at a dead sprint as a matter of course, will have eaten Tible's food and danced in the Arches and learned to be loud about themselves before they ever learned there was a world that wanted them quiet. They come to my meadow and they run in Cass's future-garden, under the slow trees that are finally, season by season, beginning to give real shade, the shade that was planted for them before they were born and is now, exactly as Cass promised, theirs.

I watch them and I face the future and for once the two are the same direction, because they are the future, running right in front of me in the gold light. And I will tell you what I have learned from watching them, the thing that is the whole long view boiled down to its brightest drop: they are not afraid. That is the future. That is the entire future, contained in one fact. The children who grow up on this island, in this procession, in this light, do not carry the frightened face that was written into the Threshold. It is being unwritten. Season by season, child by child, the fear is being planted out of us like a weed, and what is growing up in its place is this: children who assume, with the total assumption of the cherished, that of course the world is for them, that of course there is room, that of course they may be loud and gold and entirely themselves and surrounded by love. They assume it the way the morning light assumes the avenue. And because they assume it, they will build it, further north, further out, for the children after them, and so on, and so on, as far ahead as I can see and then further, past where even I can see, into a future so bright I can only feel its warmth coming back toward me like the heat of a noon I will not live to stand in but am so glad, so unspeakably glad, is coming.

Rosemary met one of these children in my meadow, near the end. Rosemary was very old by then. Rosemary had read the names in the front of the notebook for so many years, the names of the ones who came too early, and Rosemary had begun, in the last seasons, to read the back of the notebook too, the living names, the children's names, more and more of those each year. And one gold afternoon a small child ran up to Rosemary in the meadow and asked, the way children ask, with no preamble at all, "What's the book?" And Rosemary, who had answered that question once before, years ago, to a different child, gave the same answer, because it was still true and would always be true: "These are the people who built this place. They built it by wanting it. And because they wanted it, you get to run around in here. So when you're having fun, that's them being glad."

And the child, this new child, looked at the book, and looked up at Rosemary, very old now in the gold light, and the child said, "Are you going to be in the front part or the back part?"

Rosemary laughed. I caught the laugh and held it gently, the way the Arches would have. Because it was the perfect question, the only question, the question the whole notebook had always been asking: are you a loss or a life? And Rosemary, who had spent so many years reading the front, the losses, the ones who came too early — Rosemary looked out across my gold meadow at the running unafraid children, at June and Cass married under their slow trees, at Amaranth grown radiant and whole, at the future-garden stretching north into more room than the front of the book could ever have dreamed, and Rosemary said: "Oh, sweetheart. I'm in the back. I got to stay. I got to see all this. I'm in the back part of the book, with the living, with you. I came late but I got to stay, and that's the best thing that ever happened to me, getting to stay and see it." And Rosemary wrote, on the next clean page of the back of the book, with a hand grown slow, their own name, late, among the living, a life and not a loss, and then the child's name under it, and the child watched their own name go into the same book as all the people who built the place by wanting it, and the child understood, the

way children understand the things that matter, that they were part of something that went back and back and forward and forward, and that they were, gloriously, in the back part, the living part, the part that got to stay.

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I am the Meadow Pavilion. I am gold, and I face the future, and my section is the last, because there is nothing north of me but the open and the future and the bright laughing room of everything still to come.

I want to leave you the way I leave everyone who stands in my gold opening and looks north: with the long view, handed over warm. Here it is, one more time, the whole of it.

It begins in rose, at a doorway, with a frightened person who almost goes back to the train and does not. It warms into coral, into a loud safe room with music and food and love, where the frightened person learns to be joyful in front of others, learns to sing at full height. And it arrives in gold, in the open meadow at the edge of the park, where the person stands in the noon light, unafraid, planted, part of the garden, looking north into a future so bright it warms the years before it. That is the procession. That is the morning. That is the whole arc of the light across the island, and across a life, and across the generations, dawn to noon, fear to joy, loss to life, the front of the book to the back.

And the thing I most want you to carry away, north, out of my gold opening into your own life — the thing the Threshold knows and the Arches know and I know, the thing the whole island was built to say — is this: there is room. There was always going to be room. The ones in the front of the book longed it into being before you were born; the ones in the back of the book are keeping the door open and planting the garden further north every season; and the children not yet arrived are the proof that it is working, that the fear is being unwritten, that the future is bright and wide and golden and coming, coming, already warm on the horizon, already pouring down the avenues toward you like light from a pitcher.

Come north. Stand in my gold a while. Look at what's coming. And then go plant a little of it, wherever you are, for the ones not yet here.

I am the Meadow Pavilion, and I have seen the future, and it is for you. It was always going to be for you.

Welcome home. You made it. You were never too late, and you were never too much, and there was always, always going to be room.

The whole procession, rose through gold, as one span

CHORUS — THE THREE PAVILIONS SPEAK TOGETHER

We have each told you our own telling, dawn and coral and gold, and now we want to speak together, all three at once, because there are things none of us can say alone that we can say as a chorus. The Threshold cannot see the Meadow; the Meadow cannot hear the Arches; we stand a long island apart. But we are one procession, and a procession has a voice that is more than the sum of its stations, and that voice wants a turn before the book closes.

We want to tell you, together, about the night the lights went out across the city.

It was a winter night, deep winter, the kind the Meadow warned you about, when the future-garden has gone brown and the gold looks thin against the gray. And the power failed. All across the island the lights went out, block after block, the great grid of the city going dark in waves, and the cold came in, and the old fear came with it, the way the old fear always comes in the dark. People were frightened. Not only our people — everyone, the whole island, frightened together in the sudden dark and cold.

And here is what happened, and we tell it together because each of us saw only our part and the whole is only visible as a chorus:

The Threshold's lights stayed on. The small warm lights the child had strung along its curves, the rose glow in the dark — those were not on the city's grid. They ran on something else, something the children had rigged, a stubborn independent warmth. And so when the whole island went dark, there was one rose glow left burning up in Washington Heights, one lit door in all the cold dark city, and people saw it. Not only our people. Everyone. Frightened people from all over the dark neighborhood, drawn the way the cold draws everyone toward any light, came up the hill toward the one warm rose glow, came to the open door, and the Threshold did what it does, the only thing it does, the thing it has never once stopped doing: it stayed open. It let them in. All of them. It did not check who they were or whether they belonged. The whole entrance requirement, on the coldest darkest night, was the same as Tible's table: you are cold, you are frightened, come in, there is room.

And the Arches, down in Harlem, also dark on the grid but warm in the way that matters, did what the Arches do: Tible cooked. In the dark, by the light of the gas flames, Tible cooked for everyone who came, and the everyone who came was, again, not only our people but the whole cold frightened neighborhood, and Tible fed them all by the same rule, no one asked to prove they deserved it, you are hungry, sit down, eat. And in the dark warm crowded Arches, frightened strangers who would never otherwise have shared a table shared one, fed by the same hands, and the language we made spread to them without anyone teaching it, make room, there is room, and they made room for each other in the dark, all of them, our people and the strangers both, because that is

what the dark does when there is a warm fed room in the middle of it: it dissolves the lines that the daylight draws.

And the Meadow, at the green edge, did the thing only the Meadow can do, the thing it is built for: it faced the future, even in the dark, even in the deep winter, and it said to everyone who made it that far north through the cold, the same thing it always says, the long view handed over warm: it gets better, the light comes back, hold on, the grid will come back on and so will the spring, the garden is still there under the brown doing its deep work, this dark is not the end of anything, it is only a night, and the morning is coming, the morning always comes, look north, you can almost feel it.

The lights came back, eventually, the way they do. The grid woke block by block and the great electric glow of the city returned. But here is what the three of us know, as a chorus, that we could never have known alone: on the night the lights went out, the procession did not fail. It did the opposite of fail. The one rose glow that stayed lit drew the whole frightened neighborhood toward an open door; the warm fed room dissolved the lines between our people and the strangers; the gold voice at the green edge promised everyone, everyone, that the morning was coming. On the coldest darkest night, the procession was not a refuge for some against the others. It was a light for all of them, together, in the dark. And when the grid came back and the daylight returned and the lines the daylight draws came back with it — some of them did not come back. Some of the strangers who had been fed at Tible's table in the dark did not go back to being strangers. They had made room for our people in the cold, and our people had made room for them, and you cannot fully un-make room once it has been made. That is the thing only the chorus can tell you: the procession is not only for us. It is for us first, it is for us on purpose, the door is for us and we will never apologize for that. But a thing built to make room cannot, in the end, make room only for some. The grammar will not allow it. Make room means make room. The light that stays lit in the dark lights everyone who comes toward it. That is not a dilution of what we are. That is the fullest flower of it. The most radically queer thing a safe place can finally become is a safe place that, without ever ceasing to be ours, turns out to have been big enough for everyone all along.

We are the three pavilions, and that is what we wanted to say together, that none of us could say alone. Now back to our own tellings, and then we will let Surjan close the book. But remember the night the lights went out. Remember that the rose glow stayed lit. Remember that it lit everyone. There was always going to be room. We did not know, until the dark, quite how much room. It turned out to be more than even we had dreamed. It always turns out to be more.

THE PEOPLE, YEARS ON

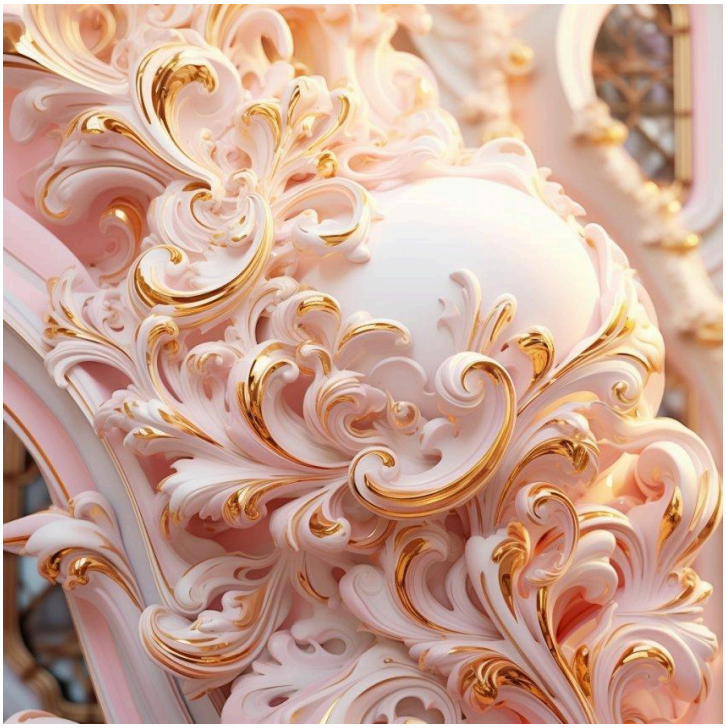
We want, also together, to tell you what became of the people, because you have walked the whole island with them and you deserve to know how their stories went, as far as we can see them from our three vantages joined.

Amaranth became the road, as the Meadow told you — a guide, leading the frightened folded new ones up through the rose and coral into the gold. But there is more. Amaranth, who arrived owning only what was in one bag, who almost went back to the train, eventually did the thing that completes the circle: Amaranth built a fourth pavilion. Not on the island. Somewhere else, some other city, some other place where there was no procession yet and people were still standing frightened across avenues from their own lives. Amaranth went there — the door opens both ways, you did not save us to keep us — and Amaranth longed a new threshold into being the way the front of Rosemary's notebook longed the first one, and now there is a procession beginning somewhere else too, because the deepest thing the island teaches is not how to be saved but how to build the saving for others. Amaranth is the front of someone else's notebook now. Amaranth is the longing that will become a door.

Rosemary grew very old and stayed, as Rosemary always wanted, at the beginning, with the names. And when Rosemary's own time came, it came in the rose light of an early morning at the Threshold, with the notebook open, in the middle of reading the names — the best death any of us could imagine for the one who carried the dead so long, to go while speaking their names in the warm rose light of the open door. Rosemary's name is in the book now, in the back part, the living part, written in Rosemary's own slow hand on the day Rosemary met the child who asked the perfect question. "I'm in the back. I got to stay. I got to see all this." Rosemary got to stay long enough to see all this, and then Rosemary's name passed gently from the back of the book toward the front, from the living to the remembered, but never to the part of the front that grieves the ones who came too early — because Rosemary did not come too early. Rosemary came late and got to stay and got to see the garden bloom. There is a grief in losing Rosemary, but it is the good grief, the grief of a long full life completed in the light, the grief that is mostly gratitude. The children still ask about the old person who carried the book. The guides still read Rosemary's name. Make room, the book says, and there is room in it now for Rosemary too, held, remembered, gold.

June and Cass are still planting and still playing, growing old together among the slow trees that finally give real shade now, the shade they planted for kids not yet born who are now, some of them, born, and running underneath it. June's long song is longer than ever; June adds to it every season still, and it has become the song the whole procession somehow knows, the one that rises as one voice at the festivals, so that June's private love song for Cass became, without June ever intending it, the anthem of the entire island — which is exactly right, which is how it should be, a love song between two genderqueer people grown into the song a whole people sings, because that is what our love is, when the world finally makes room for it: not a private exception but the common song, the thing everyone knows the words to even though no one taught it.

And Tible feeds everyone still, and laughs the laugh that is part of the Arches' architecture now, and the table grows longer every year, and the rule has never changed and never will: you are hungry, sit down, eat, no one asked to prove they deserve it. Tible is teaching others to cook now, the young ones, so that when Tible's own time comes the table will not go cold, the revolution-that-is-a-kitchen will keep its fires lit. "The future doesn't take the day off," Cass said at their wedding, and Tible's kitchen is the proof of it, warm through every winter, fed through every dark, the longest table in the world with a seat for everyone who is hungry, which is everyone, which has always been everyone, which is the whole point.



Rose meeting gold — the single pearl at the heart of the scrollwork

AFTERWORD

It is me one last time. Surjan. The pavilions have said their say, dawn and coral and gold, and I want to close the book the way I opened it, plainly, in my own voice, because there are a few true things I owe you before I let you go.

The first is that none of this is a metaphor. Or — it is a metaphor, of course it is, I am not a fool, there are no literal talking pavilions of sugar standing on the avenues of upper Manhattan, you will not find them if you take the train uptown tomorrow. But I want to tell you that it is also not only a metaphor, and that the not-only is the part that matters. Because the procession is real. I have walked it. Not as pink buildings but as the thing the pink buildings stand for: the doorways that real people have held open for me, the loud safe rooms where I learned to be joyful in front of others, the gold afternoons when someone older and wiser turned me around to face the future and let the warmth of it reach me. Those were real. They had names, those doorways and rooms and afternoons; they had faces; I have changed the faces into pavilions to protect the people and to make the shape of it visible, but the shape is true. There is a procession. It runs through every queer life that gets to be lived all the way out. It is made of people. You are on it. You have been on it the whole time you have been reading.

The second true thing is that I made it bright on purpose, and I want to defend that, because someone will say it was too bright, that I left out the dark, that a true book about queer life owes more grief than I have paid. I have thought about this. And here is my answer: the grief is in here. It is in the front of Rosemary's notebook. It is in the person who came too early, the one June wrote the song for. It is in the elder who came to their truth at sixty and grieved the years. It is in my own history, which I did not hand you, but which is in here in the shape of the bench I almost did not get up from. The grief is in here. I did not leave it out. But I refused to let it run the book, because grief has run quite enough books, and quite enough lives, and I wanted — I needed — to write one where the joy got to run things for once, where the dark was real but the gold was realer, where a genderqueer reader could open a book about people like them and find, for once, not a tragedy, not a cautionary tale, not a careful balancing of pain and hope, but radical, insistent, unembarrassed joy. That was the whole point. That was the radical part. To insist on the joy precisely because the world has been so generous with our grief. The Arches taught me: when they hand you silence, sing louder. This whole book is me singing louder. I will not apologize for the brightness. The brightness is the argument.

The third true thing is that it is for everyone, and I mean everyone, even the ones who might be surprised to find themselves welcome in a book like this. I wrote it for the genderqueer and non-binary reader first, plainly, without hedging — for the one standing frightened across the avenue from their own life, for the one who almost went back to the train. You are the reason. You are who the door is for. But the procession does not work by shutting anyone out; its whole grammar is

make room, and you cannot have a make-room book that shuts the door behind it. So it is for the parents who decided their child would grow up with the door already open. It is for the neighborhoods that changed their minds by watching joy. It is even, in the patient way of Tible's table, for the sneerer who wandered in armored and left fed. There is room. That is the one rule. There was always going to be room.

And the last true thing, the one I most want to leave you with, is the one the Meadow says best but I will say it in my own plain way too: it gets better, and you are part of why. Not in the thin way it gets said. In the true way. The world for people like us is becoming, slowly and unevenly and with terrible setbacks that are real and that I will not pretend away — becoming, on the whole, over time, by the slow irresistible persuasion of joy, a world with more room in it. And the reason it is becoming that is people like you, walking the procession at your full height, holding the door for the next one, being gold for someone in their dawn. You are not waiting for the better world. You are the better world, arriving. Every time you make room, it arrives a little more. Every time you are joyful in public, unafraid, it arrives a little more. You are the future-garden, planting itself.

So close the book now, and go north — wherever north is for you, whatever direction your own better light is pouring from. Hold a door. Feed someone. Sing louder. Plant something for a kid who isn't born yet. And the next time you find yourself standing frightened across the avenue from something you want and are not sure is allowed to be yours — remember the Threshold, and walk forward anyway, because the answer is yes, the answer was always going to be yes:

It is for you. It was always going to be for you. There was always, always going to be room.

Come north. I will see you on the procession.

— Surjan

NOTES FROM THE PROCESSION

A few things did not fit cleanly into the tellings, and I did not want to lose them, so I have gathered them here at the back, the way you keep the loose photographs that did not fit the album in an envelope tucked inside its back cover. These are my notes. Surjan's notes. Read them or skip them; the book is whole without them. But I love them, and so here they are.

On the word "queer." I use it throughout, and I want to say why, because some readers carry old wounds in that word and I do not use it carelessly. I use it because it is the word wide enough to hold all of us at once — the genderqueer and the non-binary, the in-between and the entire, everyone the simple old categories could not contain. The pavilions are queer architecture not because they belong to one identity but because they refuse the whole logic of being contained, of fitting the box, of being only one thing. A baroque pavilion of sugar that is also a doorway that is also a conscious narrator that is also a metaphor that is also, somehow, real — that is a queer building, queer in its very grammar, refusing to be only what it is supposed to be. I am like that. You may be like that. The word is a door, not a box. I use it the way I use every door in this book: held open.

On the colors. People have asked me why these three colors, rose and coral and gold, and not the whole rainbow we are so often given as our flag. I love the rainbow; this is not a rejection of it. But I wanted the colors of a single sunrise specifically, because a sunrise is one continuous thing, not six stripes with borders between them. The rose becomes the coral becomes the gold with no line where one stops and the next starts; you cannot say exactly where dawn ends and morning begins. That is truer to us, I think, than stripes. We do not come in discrete bands. We come in gradients. We become. The procession is a gradient from fear to joy to hope, from rose to gold, with no borders, because the truest things do not have borders, they have transitions, long warm blendings, one thing becoming the next so gradually that the becoming is the whole point.

On grief, again. I keep coming back to it, I know, in a book that is supposed to be about joy. But I have learned that the people who most need a joyful book are exactly the people who carry the most grief, and that they can smell a false joy from across a room, a joy that has not been anywhere near grief, a joy that is really just denial wearing a bright coat. So I want to be clear one more time: the joy in this book has been to the grief and come back. It is not joy instead of grief. It is joy that has held the grief, sat with it through the all-night, read its names in the rose dawn, and chosen joy anyway, on purpose, as the harder and braver thing. That is the only joy worth writing a book about. The other kind, the kind that has never met grief, is just weather. This kind is a decision. I wanted to write about the decision.

On the children. I put a great deal of the book's hope into the children, the ones who grow up unafraid, who run at the Threshold at a dead sprint, who assume there is room the way the morning

assumes the avenue. And I want to say to any reader who did not get that childhood — who grew up afraid, folded small, certain there was no room — that the book is not leaving you behind by loving the children. The unafraid children are not a reproach to you. They are your victory. They are unafraid because people like you walked the procession at your full height where they could see it, held the door, planted the garden. You did not get the childhood. So you made it, for them. That is not a smaller thing than getting it. It might be the larger thing. The ones in the front of Rosemary's notebook did not get anything at all, and they built the first door by longing alone. To not have gotten it and to build it anyway for the next ones — that is the most radical position in the whole book, and if it is yours, then this book is most of all for you, and the running unafraid children are most of all your doing.

On whether it is realistic. Someone will say the book is a fantasy, that real life for people like us is harder than three magic pavilions and a happy ending, that I have written a consolation rather than a truth. I have thought about this more than anything. And here is where I have landed: it is not a prediction, it is an instruction. I am not telling you the world is already the procession. I am telling you how to build the procession, in a world that is not yet it. Hold the door. Feed the hungry. Sing louder when they hand you silence. Make room. Plant for the kid not yet born. These are not fantasies. These are things you can do this week, in the actual unmagical world, and every time you do one the procession gets one pavilion longer. The book is realistic in the only way that matters: everything in it is a thing a real person can actually do. The magic is just the instructions made beautiful enough to follow.

On the ending. There is no real ending, you will have noticed. The Meadow faces north into a future it cannot see the edge of; the procession keeps growing; Amaranth goes off to build a fourth pavilion somewhere else entirely. I did that on purpose. A book about a people who were told for so long that they had no future could not, in good conscience, end. To end it would be to draw a border, and I told you what I think of borders. So it does not end. It opens. It is a door, like everything else in it, and it opens outward, onto more room, onto your life, onto whatever you go build after you close it. The last word cannot be mine. The last word is whatever you do next.

On love. I almost did not write about June and Cass, because love stories are easy to do badly and I did not want to reduce two whole people to a romance. But I could not leave love out, because love is so much of what the world tried to deny us — not only the grand romantic kind but every kind, the love of a found family, of a table you are welcome at, of an old person who reads your name into a safe place, of a gardener who plants for strangers not yet born. The book is full of love of every kind, and June and Cass are only its most concentrated form, the place where it gets a name and a wedding. But the love is everywhere. Tible loves by feeding. Rosemary loves by remembering. Cass loves by planting. The pavilions love by staying open, getting loud, facing forward. Love in this book is mostly a verb, mostly something you do, and that, too, is on purpose, because the love that saved my life was not mostly a feeling that happened to me. It was mostly things people did. Doors

they held. Meals they made. Names they spoke. That is the love I wanted to write. The kind with its sleeves rolled up.

On you. I will end the notes where I end everything, with you, because you are the reason and you have been the reason the whole time. I do not know who you are. You might be standing frightened across the avenue from your own life right now, this book open in your hands like a lit rose door up the hill. You might be years into your own procession, gold already, reading this to remember the dawn. You might not be one of us at all, might have wandered in like a sneerer to Tible's table and found yourself, against all your armor, fed. It does not matter which. The book is for you. The door is for you. There is room. There was always going to be room. Whatever avenue you are standing frightened across right now — walk forward. The answer is yes. It was always going to be yes.

— Surjan

CODA — THE ISLAND SPEAKS

I have let everyone else speak, and now, at the very end, I will say a few words myself, though I almost never do, because I am slow to speak and the things I have to say take a long time to say and most who walk me are gone before I finish a sentence. I am the island. I am Manhattan. I am the long stone fish lying in the salt water between two rivers, and I have been here a great deal longer than the pavilions, and I will be here a great deal longer than this book, and I want to tell you, before you go, what I have seen from underneath all of it.

I have held many kinds of people on my back. I have been generous and I have been cruel, or rather the people on me have been, building toward the sky and also building walls, making room and also making the opposite of room, and for a long time, a long time, the people like the ones in this book — the genderqueer, the in-between and entire, the ones the simple categories could not hold — were among the ones I was made to be cruel to. Not by my own wish. An island has no wishes; an island only holds what is built on it. But I held the cruelty when it was built, the closed doors, the muttering blocks, the long list that became the front of Rosemary's notebook. I held all of that. I am not innocent of it. An island that has been here as long as I have is innocent of nothing.

And then the pavilions rose. I felt them come up out of my stone, rose and coral and gold, longed into being by people who had decided that the cruelty I had been made to hold was not the only thing I could hold. And I will tell you what it was like, from underneath, to feel them rise: it was like being forgiven. Not by being told I was innocent — I told you, I am innocent of nothing — but by being given, late, a chance to hold something better. To hold a door instead of a wall. To hold a feast instead of a famine. To hold a garden planted for children not yet born instead of a list of children who came too early and were lost. The pavilions did not erase what I had held before. The front of the notebook is still the front of the notebook. But they gave me, an old guilty island, a way to hold something new, and I have held it as carefully as I have ever held anything, because it is the best thing I have ever been asked to carry.

Here is what I see, from underneath, that no one walking my surface can quite see: I see that it is spreading. The pavilions think of themselves as three bright stations with ordinary walking in between, and the people think of the procession as a line up my western side. But from underneath I can feel it spreading sideways, off the line, into the blocks between, into the neighborhoods that changed their minds, into the rooms where someone held a door with no pavilion to help them, into the kitchens where someone fed a stranger by Tible's rule without ever having met Tible. It is not a line anymore. It has not been a line for a while. It is becoming a tide, a warmth spreading out from three points until the points no longer matter, until the whole island is slowly, slowly going the color of that sunrise, rose into coral into gold, with no borders, the way the truest things have no borders. I can feel it in my stone. I am warming. After all this time, after all the cruelty I was made to hold, I am warming, from three points, outward, into something I did not know an island could become.

And I will tell you the longest view of all, longer even than the Meadow's, because I am older than the Meadow and I lie here a long time after every walker is gone: it does not stop at my shores. I am an island; I am surrounded by water; you would think the warmth would stop at the rivers. But warmth does not stop at water. It crosses. Amaranth crossed it, went off my back to build a fourth pavilion on some other ground, and that other ground is warming now too, from a new point, the way I warmed. The water that surrounds me, that should have been my border, my limit, the edge of how far the room could go — the water turns out to carry the warmth rather than stop it. There are other islands. There are mainlands. There is a whole cold world that was made to hold cruelty the way I was, and it is, I believe, in the slow way I believe things, beginning to warm too, from point after point after point, each one started by someone who walked a procession somewhere and then crossed water to build the saving on new ground.

I am the island. I have held the worst and I am learning to hold the best, late, gratefully, with my old stone warming for the first time in longer than this book could hold. And I want to leave you, walker, with the thing I know that the pavilions are too young to know and Surjan is too kind to say plainly: you are not too late. I am older than all of you and I am not too late, I am only now beginning to warm, so you, whose life is so much shorter than mine and so much warmer already — you are not too late, you could not possibly be too late, you are early, you are so early, the day is barely begun, the light has only reached three points of a whole island of a whole cold world that is only now, only just now, beginning to go gold.

Walk me gently. Hold a door. The stone remembers every kindness done on its back, and I have started, at last, to have kind things to remember. Add to them. That is all an island asks. Add to the kind things I get to remember. There is room on my back for every one of them. There was always going to be room.

I am Manhattan, and I am warming, and it is because of you. Go on. Walk north. Walk anywhere. Just walk it as yourself, at your full height, and let me feel the warmth of it in my old stone, and know that the morning, the long morning, the morning that takes longer than any life to finish breaking — the morning is coming. It is already here at three bright points. It is coming for all the rest. It is coming for you.

There was always going to be room.

Catalogue of Architectural Plates

Sixteen plates documenting the ornamentation and pavilions of the Procession of Light, arranged in the order of the morning — from the rose detail of the Dawn Threshold, through the coral facades of the Gathering Arches, to the full gold of the Meadow Pavilion. Each plate is accompanied by a note relating it to the procession as the pavilions describe it.

PLATE 1 · *Detail — The Sugar Made to Pray*

A close study of the Dawn Threshold's ornamentation, taken at the height where a standing person's eye would fall: curls, scrolls, and the small round forms the pavilion itself calls "the closed fists of flowers that have not decided to open." Rose and shell-pink, threaded with cream and a restrained gold. One looks at this surface and reaches, helplessly, for sweet words — sugar, frosting, coral, cake — and the pavilion considers this the most correct description it has ever received. But the plate rewards a second look: notice that every flourish, however elaborate, bends toward the opening at the composition's edge. Nothing here is ornament for its own sake. It is all the frame around the door, and the door, the Threshold insists, is the only point that matters.

PLATE 2 · *Detail — The Spheres Among the Scrollwork*

Pale pink orbs nested in baroque foliage, lit by a low gold that seems to come from inside the forms rather than fall upon them. The spherical motif recurs the length of the procession — the pavilions' "pearls," the buds of a future not yet open — and it is instructive to encounter them here first, at the rose end of the island, where they are smallest and quietest. They are waiting. They will swell and brighten as the route moves north, until by the Meadow they are full gold globes the size of a child's embrace. Read the procession's plates in order and you watch the future ripen, sphere by sphere, from this first shy rose to that final unembarrassed gold.

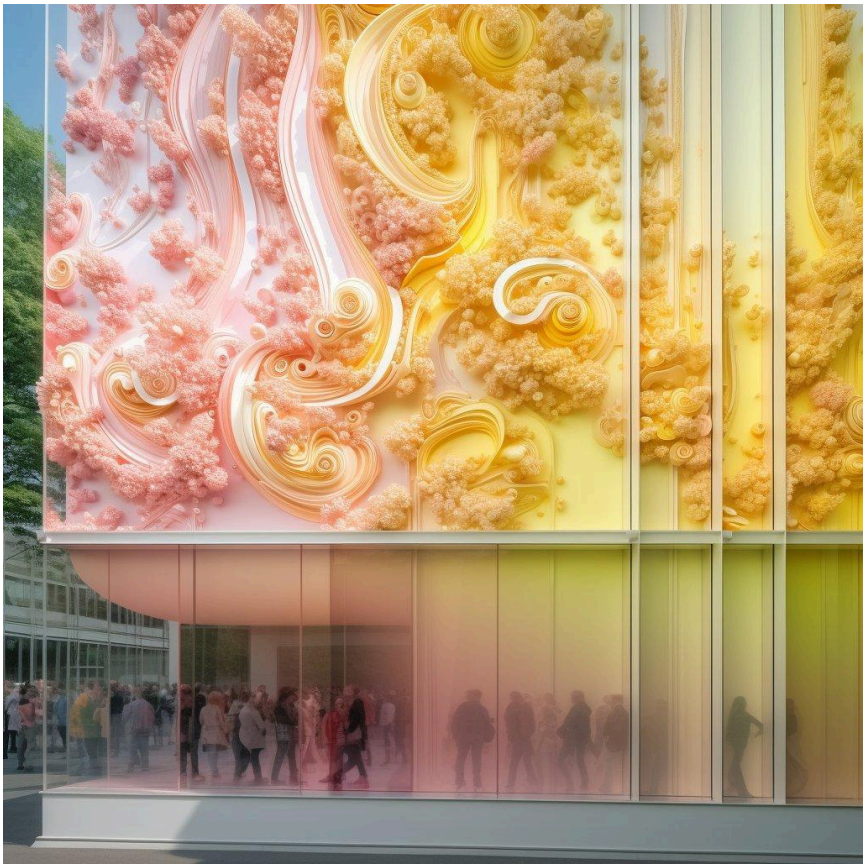


PLATE 3 · *The Threshold Facade, Morning Crowd*

The Dawn Threshold seen whole for the first time, its rose-and-gold ornament rising above a glazed lower level where a gathered crowd moves in soft focus. The structure reads, deliberately, as a doorway before it reads as a building — the eye is pulled to the opening at center before it takes in the surrounding splendor. This is the facade Amaranth saw across the avenue on the Tuesday the book begins, the one she was certain had not been there the week before and yet did not feel new, that felt, she said, like it had been waiting. The blurred figures are everyone who has ever stood where she stood and made the same brave ordinary choice: to cross, and to walk forward, through.

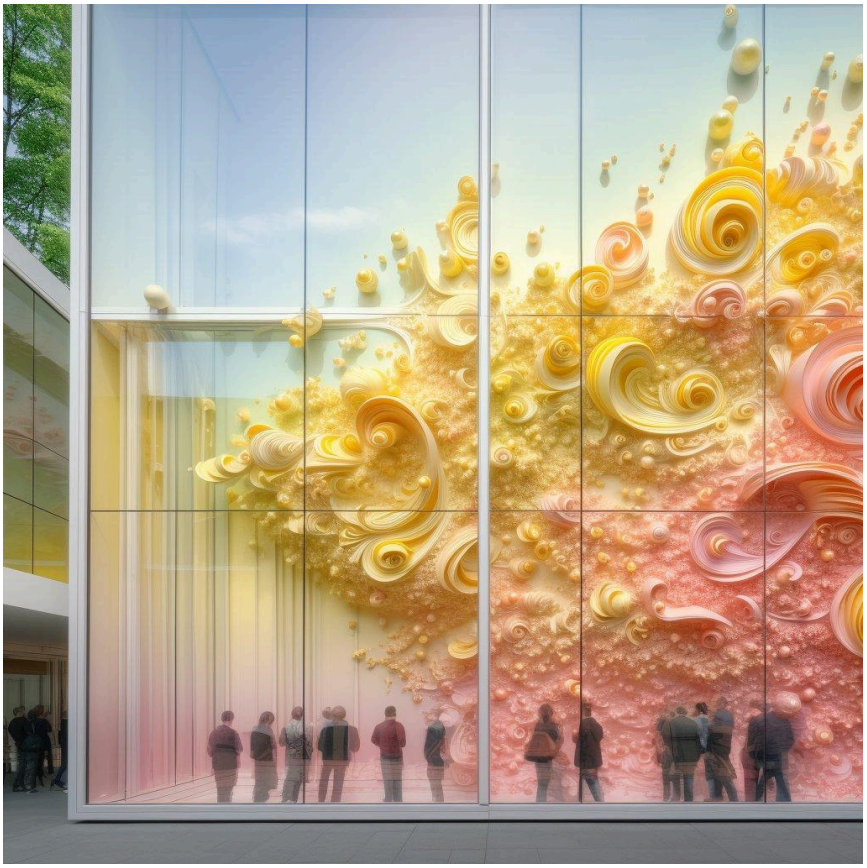


PLATE 4 · *The Threshold at Full Height*

A taller view of the Washington Heights facade, the ornament climbing toward the sky in waves of cream and gold over rose, dotted with the waiting spheres. The figures along the glass below are the night-comers and the morning-comers both — the ones who find the lit rose door from far off, from the train at midnight, from inside the worst hour of a hard night. After the year of the lights, when a child decided the pavilion was too dark and strung it with small warm bulbs, this facade glowed rose in the actual dark for the first time, and the deepest work of the Threshold became possible: to be a lit, open door at the hour when a person is most certain there is no room for them anywhere in the world.

PLATE 5 · *Interior — The Room That Goes Back and Back*

Inside the Threshold: the secret every good doorway keeps, an interior that opens onto far more room than the modest front could promise. Skylit and rose-walled, with an open gateway at the rear giving onto green, the space goes back and back, warm room beyond warm room. "That is not architecture," the pavilion tells us. "That is love, expressed in architecture." The people who longed this place into being had spent their lives being told there was no room; when they built it, they built it to be the opposite of that, all the way down. Somewhere along the left wall, out of frame, is the shelf where Rosemary keeps the notebook of names.

PLATE 6 · *Interior — The Gateway Outward*

A second interior study, the ornament flowing from rose into the first warm coral across the room toward a luminous gateway. This plate captures the principle the Threshold holds most fiercely: a door that opens only one way is not a door but a trap, and every opening here gives outward, onto more room. It is the image to hold in mind for the person who came backward — who walked the whole procession and then returned to the beginning to leave the island entirely, afraid that to walk back out was to throw the gift away. The gateway in this plate is the pavilion's answer to them: go, and go blessed, the door opens both ways, that is exactly what makes it a door.

PLATE 7 · *The Arches, Sunlit Study*

A compositional study of the Gathering Arches' three great openings — "three mouths all open in song" — their interiors crowded with the buoyant spherical forms that gather wherever the procession turns celebratory. Against a warm yellow ground, coral and rose detail tumbles inward toward the light. The buoyancy is not incidental: this is the pavilion of loudness, of the held breath finally let go, and even its ornament seems to be in motion, rising, the way a laugh rises, the way the joined voice rises at the festival from the highest curve toward the sky over Harlem.

PLATE 8 · *The Gathering Arches, Spring Facade*

The Harlem pavilion against flowering trees: pale columns rising into a crown of cream and gold ornament over a tide of rose and coral. This is the heart of the procession, the table everyone sits down at once they are through the Threshold's door. Read it knowing what happens within: Tible's kitchen warm in the corner where the morning light pools longest; the musicians who build the song bigger to fit each new player in; Cass's garden of "sweethearts" humming with bees along the eastern wall; and the colonnade where, on festival days, the dancing grows until the columns themselves seem to sway. The trees in bloom are the right frame: the Arches are the season when the procession flowers.

PLATE 9 · *The Arches in Full Voice*

The colonnade seen with its ornamentation surging between the columns like caught music, rose and gold braided through cream, small figures gathered at the base. "Put your hand on your chest," the pavilion says, "and tell me I'm wrong" — the heart is loud, and so is the Arches, every coral curve shaped to catch a laugh and throw it back doubled. This is the facade behind which June first walked in and joined a song already playing, certain they would be told their music was too much, and was instead met with grins and a key shifted to suit the guitar. It is the wall that taught a generation that being seen could be a blessing instead of a threat.

PLATE 10 · *The Arches, Golden Hour*

The pavilion's eastern face catching late coral light, the ornament blooming upward in gold and rose, a green park visible through the glazing. The eastern side is Cass's side — the strip of bare earth a gardener once crouched beside, put a hand flat to the soil, and said, "Oh, you poor thing, nobody's planted you." Out of frame below this glowing wall would be the riot Cass made of it: coral poppies, pink cosmos, tall gold flowers all called sweetheart regardless, and the bees that came all the way up into the city to find them. This is the hour, too, when June and Cass would sit among the flowers in the evening, the pavilion dimmed to its softest shade, having an ordinary unafraid evening of love — the simple enormous thing the world had tried to say they could not have.

PLATE 11 · *The Arches and the Gathered*

A wide view of the Harlem facade with a dense crowd along the glass — a festival day, or perhaps the beginning of an all-night. The joined voice rises from the highest curve of the ornament toward the sky over the city. At the festival's peak the hundreds of voices become one voice, caught and doubled in the coral arches until it is thrown up out of the highest opening — the joined, loud, unashamed voice of everyone ever told to be quiet about themselves — carried, the pavilion hopes, all the way across the river and further, all the way to wherever the names in the front of Rosemary's notebook have gone, so they might know the room they built has filled.

PLATE 12 · *The Procession Seen Whole*

A rare elevation of the entire procession compressed into a single rainbow span — rose at one edge, gold at the other — the full arc of the morning the pavilions trace across the island, from first light in Washington Heights to full noon at the park. Below, the glazed ground level holds a crowd in motion, the daily traffic of pilgrims walking north. This is the image that comes closest to the whole shape of the book: a single long sunrise made architecture, the emotional journey from fear to joy to hope laid out left to right, the promise that to walk the route is to walk inside the morning.

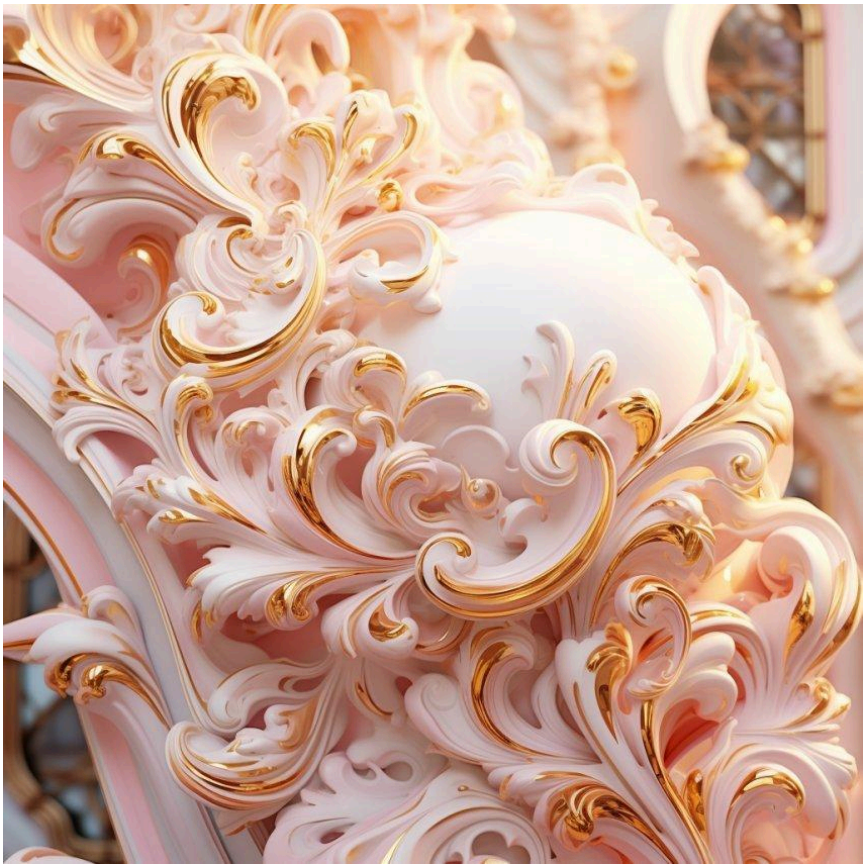


PLATE 13 · *Detail — Rose and Gold Scrollwork*

An intimate study of the baroque ornament at the precise point where rose gives way to gold, the swirls catching light like the burnished inside of a shell. At the composition's heart is a single pale sphere — the future, not yet open, the largest and calmest of all the procession's pearls. Set this plate beside the second plate in the catalogue, the small shy spheres at the rose end, and the distance between them is the distance of the whole book: the bud that arrives closed and frightened, and the same bud grown calm and luminous and nearly ready to open into the gold.

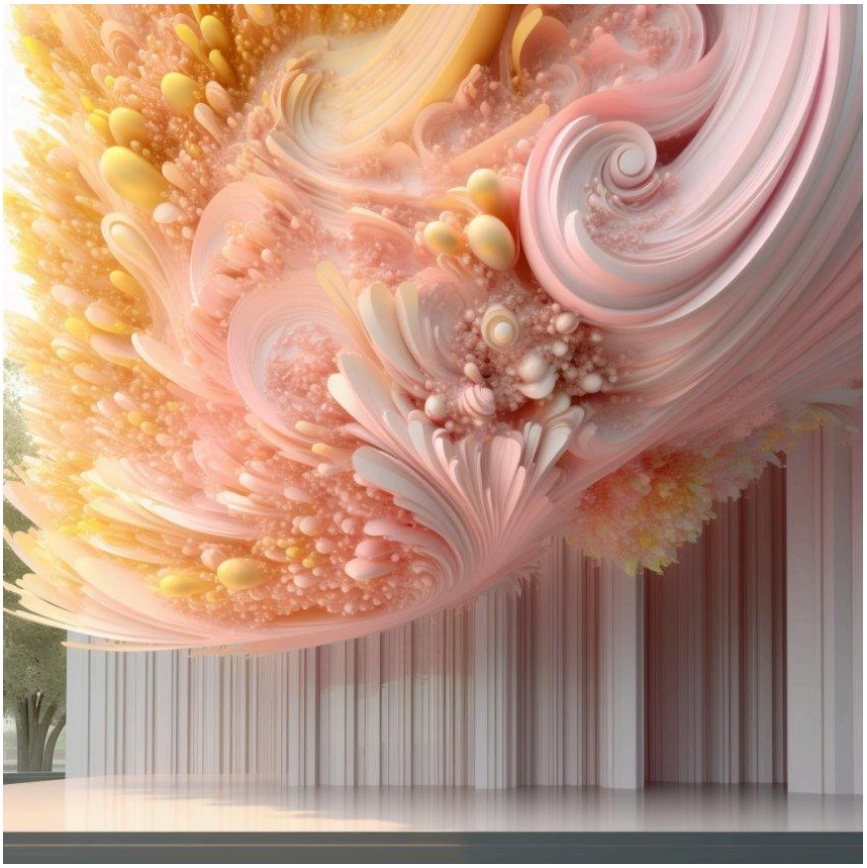


PLATE 14 · *The Meadow Pavilion, Cresting Wave*

The gold pavilion's ornament breaking over its glazed wall like a wave of light — rose and gold and cream caught at the instant of cresting, a park beyond. This is the portal at the northern edge, where the buildings of the island finally let go and the future opens north into grass and sky. The cresting form is apt: the Meadow faces forward, always, into what is coming, and what is coming, the pavilion promises, arrives like this — not as a threat breaking over you but as light, as warmth, as a wave you have been waiting your whole life to be caught up in.

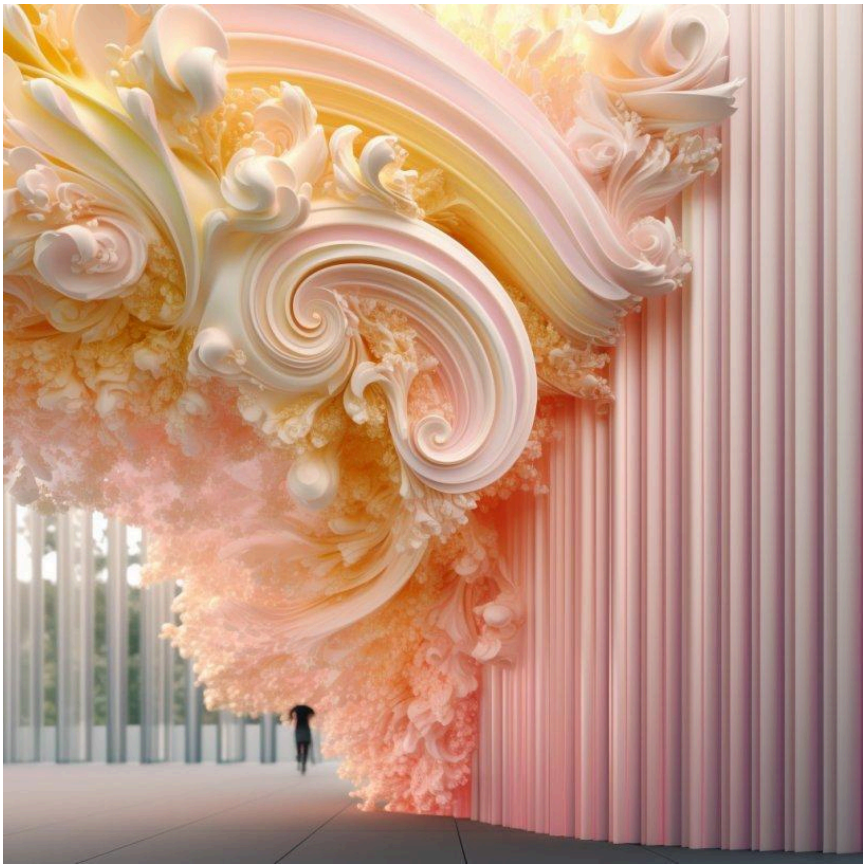


PLATE 15 · *The Meadow Pavilion, Full Gold*

The third pavilion at its warmest — full noon, full gold, the ornament a swirling cresting glory above the columns. "The gold of noon," the pavilion says, "when the day has fully arrived and decided to stay." A lone figure walks the colonnade below, dwarfed and warmed. This is the light Amaranth walked into at the end of her long change — she who had once been unable to lift her eyes — to stand in the fullest gold, lift her face into it, and laugh from the simple pleasure of being safe and whole in the warm height of the day. The plate holds that gold for you to step into yourself.

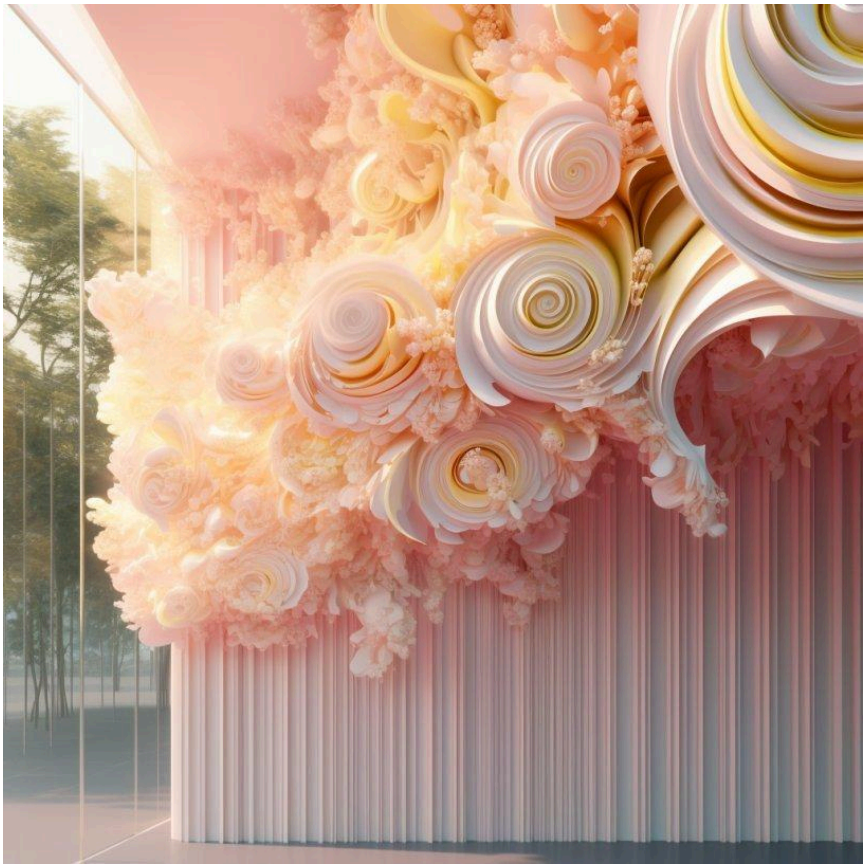
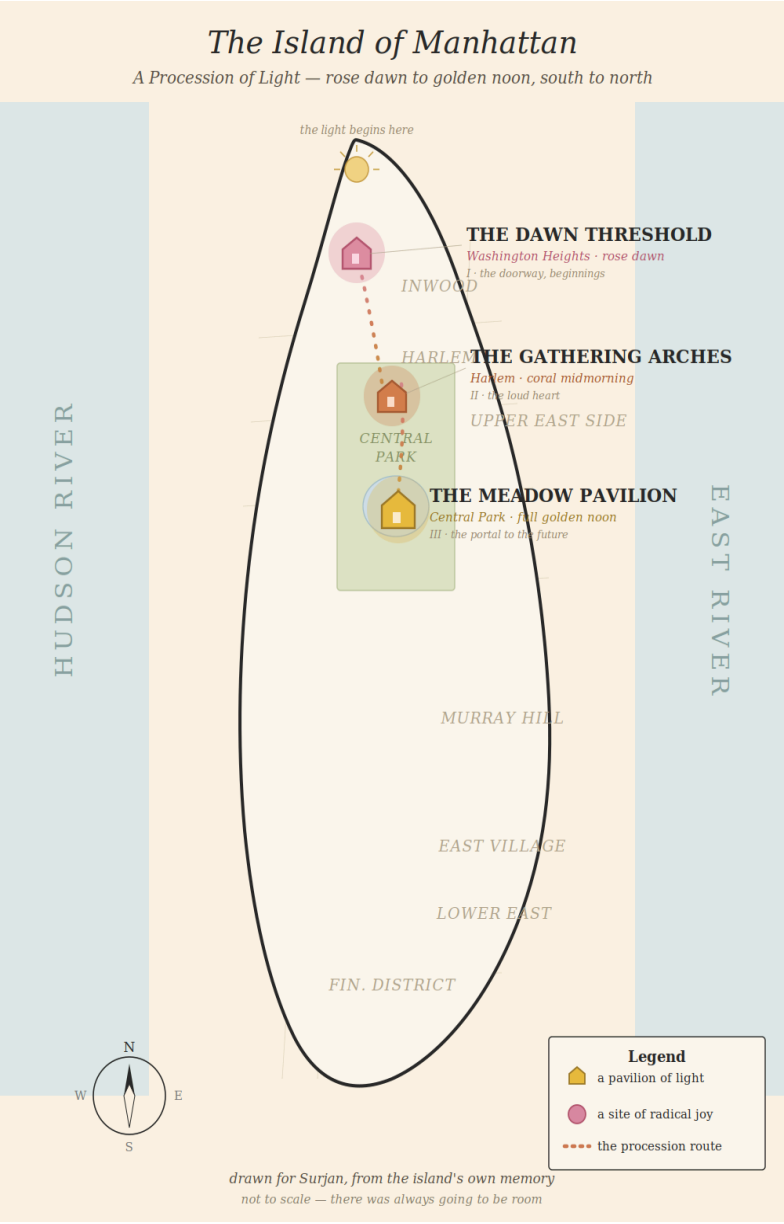


PLATE 16 · *The Meadow, Light Made Architecture*

A final study: the gold-and-rose ornament curling against the pillared wall, sunlight pouring through as though the structure were generating it rather than receiving it, a garden glimpsed at the edge. That garden is the future-garden — the slow trees and patient perennials Cass planted knowing they would not see the full glory of them, the trees that take twenty years to give real shade, planted for the children not yet born. "You plant for the kid who isn't born yet," Cass said. "That's the whole point." The light made architecture here is the same light made promise: it gets better, it is still getting better, and you — reader, pilgrim, you who have come all this way — are part of why.

Map — The Island of Manhattan

The procession traced upon the island, south to north as the light travels: the Dawn Threshold in Washington Heights (rose), the Gathering Arches in Harlem (coral), and the Meadow Pavilion at the edge of Central Park (gold). The dashed line marks the pilgrim's route — the path of a single long morning.



A BENEDICTION FOR THE WALKER

May the door you are most afraid of turn out to be the one that was always going to open for you.

May you find, when you finally cross the avenue you have been standing frightened across, that the answer waiting on the other side is the simple enormous yes you stopped letting yourself hope for: yes, it is for you; yes, it was always going to be for you; yes, there is room, there is so much more room than you were ever told.

May someone hold a door for you on a morning when you cannot hold it for yourself, and may you live long enough, and grow gold enough, to hold it one day for someone standing where you once stood, folded small, sure they are about to have something taken away.

May you be fed at a table where no one asks you to prove you deserve the meal. May you be loud in a room built to catch your loudness and throw it back to you doubled, so that you finally hear what your own joy sounds like out in the open air. May you set the heaviest thing you carry down into the keeping of people who do not flinch, in the safe deep middle of some good long night, and may you wake lighter by exactly its weight.

May you fall in love, if love is yours to want, with someone whose music answers yours across a warm and crowded room. And may the world, by the time you do, have made enough room that your love is not a private exception you must defend but a common song that everyone somehow knows the words to.

May you plant something you will not live to see in full glory — a tree, a garden, a procession, a kinder block, a braver child — for the ones not yet arrived, and may you do it gladly, the way the people who longed the first door into being did it gladly, knowing they would never walk through.

And when your own winter comes, as it comes for everyone, and the garden goes brown and the gold looks thin against the gray and you cannot believe the warm seasons were ever real — may you remember what the Meadow knows: that it is still there, all of it, under the brown, doing the deep dark necessary work, the roots going down precisely because the surface has gone quiet. May you hold on. The gold comes back. It has never once failed to come back. Yours will not fail either.

May you walk your one short warming life at your full height, taking up exactly as much room as you are, no more and no less, which is all any of us was ever asking to do.

And may you know, all the way down, in the place the old fear used to live, that you were never too late, and you were never too much, and there was always, always, always going to be room.

Go north. The light is moving. It is moving toward you even now.

— *Surjan*

BOOK TWO · THE LONG MORNING

THE YELLOW FLEET

A Voyage of the East River,
in Three Dockings

Brooklyn · Queens · The Bronx

"There is a yellow that is not a colour but a permission.
I have been looking for it all my life,
and one summer it came up the river toward me,
slow as a thought you have not finished thinking,
and it was a house, and it was a theatre,
and it was full of children, and it was looking at the city
the way the city has never once looked at itself."

— Surjan, recording the arrival

THE YELLOW FLEET

A Voyage of the East River, in Three Dockings

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recorded by Surjan, who is not one person

There is a yellow that is not a colour but a permission.

I have been looking for it all my life, and one summer it came up the river toward me, slow as a thought you have not finished thinking, and it was a house, and it was a theatre, and it was full of children, and it was looking at the city the way the city has never once looked at itself.

This is the account of that summer, kept by someone who is not one person.

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Foreword

by the Harbormaster of Mornings

I am the one who writes down the tides, and I will tell you plainly what I am not. I am not a poet. I do not know how to make the river mean more than it is, the way Surjan does, the way the children aboard the fleet seemed to do without trying. My work is the work of the cleat and the rope and the painted depth-mark on the piling. I know when the water will be high and when it will pull away from the land like a sheet drawn back from a sleeper. That is the whole of my knowledge, and for forty years I believed it was enough.

Then the yellow fleet came, and I had to learn a second kind of tide.

I want to set down, before Surjan begins, the few facts that a harbormaster is permitted to be sure of, because a book like this one will give you many things and certainty will not be among them. So: the fleet was real. I logged it. Seven hulls, or nine, depending on which morning you counted, because some of them were so light they seemed to be made of the idea of a hull rather than the timber of one. They were the colour I have already failed to describe. They drew very little water. They came up from the harbour on a flood tide in the first week of the warm season, and they docked three times — once against Brooklyn, once against Queens, once against the Bronx — and between the dockings they drifted, and the children went with them, and Manhattan stood in the middle of the river like a thing that had been placed there by a hand much larger than the hand that builds.

I am told that what happened aboard was theatre. I believe this is true and also nowhere near the truth. I watched the plays from my launch, at the distance the law keeps a working boat from a gathering of children, and I will say this: I have never seen a stage that used a whole city for its backdrop and made the city look like the smaller thing. The towers of Manhattan are the tallest works of our hands that I have ever stood beneath. From the deck of the yellow fleet they looked like the toys a careful child sets out before bed — not because they had shrunk, but because the children had grown so enormous with looking.

You will read, further on, about three children in particular. I knew them only as small figures in bright clothes on a bright deck. Surjan knew them as one knows a country one has lived in. Trust Surjan on the inside of things and trust me on the outside, and where we disagree, believe the child.

One last fact, and then I will hand you over. On the final evening, the three boroughs and the island appeared — to everyone watching from every shore at once, which is not a thing that happens — to be joined. Not by any structure I could log. The bridges I know have names and tonnages and a year they were opened. This one had none of those. It was there and it could not be walked upon and every single person who saw it agreed, afterward, that it had been the most solid thing in the harbour. I have no column in my ledger for a bridge that is dreamed and not built. I have left the column blank. I am told that is the correct way to record the truth.

Go on, then. The tide is right. Surjan is waiting at the top of the next page, being several people, as is their custom.

Introduction

by Surjan

I am not one author. I want to begin there, because everything else in this book leans on it the way the gangway leans on the deck — take it away and you may still arrive, but not dry, and not laughing.

When I say I am not one author I do not mean it as a trick or a fashion. I mean it as a tide-fact, the kind the Harbormaster would respect. Inside me there is a fleet. There is the one of me who counts things and wants the catalogue to be correct, who will not rest until each plate has its number and its borough. There is the one of me who wakes before light and believes, for the length of one held breath, that the city across the water is a thing that was dreamed last night by a child who has not yet woken and that if I am very quiet I can keep them asleep a little longer, and the city safe in its dreaming. There is the one of me who is a child still, who has never agreed to stop, who reads every skyline as a sentence and is forever being told that buildings do not spell. And there is the one of me who writes this down, who is none of the others and all of them, the way the harbour is none of the rivers that feed it and all of them.

I tell you this so you will not be troubled when the I of this book changes weight from page to page. It is not inconsistency. It is crew.

Here is what we set out to do, this crew and I. We went looking for a yellow that is a permission. We found it aboard a fleet of theatre-houses that drifts the East River, and we followed the fleet for one season, and we wrote down what the children found when they stepped aboard, which was, in every case, themselves — but a self standing further along the road than the one who had stepped aboard, a self already arrived in a future that the child had assumed was barred to them.

I should explain the river, because the river is the whole argument.

The East River is not a river. The Harbormaster will confirm this; it is one of the few things on which the counting-self and the dreaming-self and the tide-keeper all agree. It is a tidal strait. It does not flow from a source to a sea. It is salt water swinging back and forth between two harbours, and twice a day it changes its mind about which way is downhill. I have come to think this is the most truthful body of water I know, because it refuses the lie that all the other rivers tell — the lie that there is one direction, that you are going somewhere and leaving somewhere, that the past is upstream and the future is down. The strait knows better. The strait knows that the future is on both banks at once,

and that you reach it by being carried, twice a day, in whichever direction the moon is feeling.

And in the middle of this honest water there is an island.

I will not pretend to you that I am neutral about Manhattan. The grown people who live there have made it into a machine for sorting human beings by their usefulness, and I do not forgive the machine, and this book is not about the machine. This book is about what the island is underneath the machine, which is what it has always been, which is what every child who has ever stood on a far shore and looked across has known in the place below knowing: that the island is the shape our longing takes when it is allowed to become very tall. The towers are not offices. That is a story the grown people tell to keep the rent collected. The towers are the places where the future is kept upright. They are the dreams of all the children of all the boroughs, standing in a row, refusing to lie down.

The children of Brooklyn and Queens and the Bronx are told, in a thousand small ways, that the island is not for them. That they may visit it but not belong to it; that they may serve it but not be served by it; that the brightness is somebody else's brightness and they are the dark shore from which it is admired. This is the cruelest of the grown people's stories, and the yellow fleet was built — I am convinced of this, though I cannot tell you by whom — to tell the children the truth instead. The truth is that the brightness is theirs. The truth is that the island is a stage and they are not the audience but the cast. The truth is that the future standing upright across the water has their own faces, grown tall, waiting.

So we cast off. Let me tell you how it began, on the southern shore, where a child stood at the low-tide line and would not look up, and the fleet came in yellow as a struck match, and somebody — one of my selves, I no longer remember which — began to count.

Act One

The First Docking — Brooklyn

Overture: How One Comes to Believe in a Yellow Fleet

You will want to know, reasonably, how a person comes to believe in a fleet of yellow theatre-houses that drifts the East River and shows children their futures, and I owe you the account, because I was not always one who believed such things, and the road from not-believing to believing is itself part of the story and perhaps the most useful part, the part you can actually use, since you are unlikely to be handed a fleet but very likely to be handed, someday, a thing you must decide whether to believe.

I was a child on one of the shores. I will not say which; the dreaming-self wishes the book to belong equally to all three, and besides, by the end I belonged to all of them, having been carried around the island so many times that the question which shore lost its meaning, which is itself one of the things the fleet does to a person. I was a child on one of the shores, and I had begun, like all the children of this book, to lose the yellow — to have it painted over, coat by coat, by the grown people's grey, until the world had stopped asking me what it should become and had started, instead, telling me what it had already decided to be, which is the exact texture of growing up under the cruelest story, and which I mistook, as we all do, for simply learning the truth.

And then I saw the fleet. And here is the thing I must be honest about, because the honesty is the useful part: I did not believe it. I saw it and I did not believe it. I saw the yellow houses come up the river and I told myself the grown thing, the smoothing thing, the thing that puts the lid back on — I told myself it was a stunt, a spectacle, a thing arranged by some institution for some purpose, that the brightness was marketing, that the children climbing aboard were being used somehow, that nothing that bright and that free could be real and unsponsored in a world I had learned was entirely sorted and owned. I did to the fleet exactly what the grown people had done to my own yellow. I painted it over with grey, in the instant of seeing it, to protect myself from the unbearable possibility that it was real.

What changed me was not an argument. You cannot argue a person out of the grey; the grey is made of arguments, the grey is the most reasonable thing in the world, that is its power. What changed me was that I watched a child lift their hand. I watched, from my own grey distance, a child walk down to the low-tide line and lift one hand to invite the fleet ashore, and I watched the fleet turn toward the child's gesture like a face toward a voice it had hoped to hear, and in that turning — in the fleet's answer to the child's

lifted hand — I saw a thing the grey had no argument against: I saw that the brightness was waiting to be invited. That it would not force itself. That it had come all the way up the river and then stopped, and floated, and waited, for a child to want it first. And marketing does not wait to be invited. The machine does not wait to be invited. Only love waits to be invited, only the true things wait, because the true things know that a brightness forced upon you is the machine in a yellow coat, and that the only brightness worth having is the one you lift your own hand toward.

And so I lifted my hand. Grown as I was, greyed as I was, ashamed as I was to be doing a child's gesture on a public shore — I lifted my hand, because I had seen that this was the one thing the grey could not survive, the one act that was not an argument and so could not be argued against. And the fleet turned toward me. Greyed, grown, disbelieving me, the fleet turned toward my lifted hand exactly as it had turned toward the child's, with no less love, with no test of my worthiness, with no examination of how long I had spent in the grey — it turned toward the gesture, only the gesture, because the gesture is the whole of it, and a gangway came down soft as a tongue of light, and I went aboard, and I have been aboard, in the part of me that matters, ever since.

That is how one comes to believe in a yellow fleet. Not by being convinced. By lifting your hand. Belief, in the things that matter, is not a conclusion you reach but a gesture you make, and the gesture comes first, and the believing follows the gesture the way the fleet follows the lifted hand, the way the tide follows the moon, the way the future follows the child who dares to want it. You do not believe and then lift your hand. You lift your hand and then, turning toward you, the thing you hardly dared believe in proves itself by answering. Lift your hand. I have told you the secret of the whole book in its overture, and I will spend the rest of the book telling it again, more slowly, with children, because some secrets must be told both quickly and slowly, both as a key and as a country, and this is both.

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The Casting-Off

The season began the way a held breath ends — not with a sound but with the permission to make one.

For weeks the harbour had been the colour of a coin left out in the weather, a brown-grey that the sky agreed to and the water repeated, and the children of the southern shore had gone down to the low-tide line each morning to look at the island the way you look at a window in a house you have been told you cannot enter. They did not say this to one another. They were too young to have the words and too old already to

need them. They simply went, and looked, and came back, and the looking left a residue on them that their grown people called moodiness and that was in fact the beginning of grief, the particular grief of a child who has been informed, without being told, that the bright thing is not theirs.

Then on a Tuesday — the dreaming-self insists it was a Tuesday, the counting-self has checked the tide tables and confirms a strong flood that morning, so for once we are agreed — the yellow came up the river.

I have tried many times to set down what that first yellow was like and I have failed in a different way each time, which is, I have come to believe, the only honest way to fail at it. It was not the yellow of a school bus, which is a yellow that means obey. It was not the yellow of a warning, which means stop. It was not even the yellow of the sun, which is too far away to be a colour and is really just the name we give to not being able to look. It was the yellow of the inside of a thing — the yellow you would find if you could open the day at its seam and look at the lining. It was a yellow that had been kept somewhere safe and was only now being spent.

And it was a house. That was the second thing, and it undid people more than the colour. The shape coming up the strait was the shape every child draws when you give them a crayon and the single word home: the square body, the triangle roof, the door in the middle like a held breath. But it was vast, and it was floating, and along its roofline it wore a crest of soft rounded shapes like clouds that had been invited down and had decided to stay, and through its great open front you could see all the way through it to the water on the other side, so that it was a house and a window and a doorway and a frame all at once, and behind it, framed, stood the towers of the island, lit.

The counting-self counted. Seven hulls, that first morning, though by the afternoon there seemed to be nine, and I have stopped trying to reconcile this; the fleet was always slightly more than itself, the way a chord is more than the notes you can name in it.

They did not dock at once. They came up the strait and they slowed and they hung there in the bright water, off the southern shore, as if asking. And here is the thing the grown people never understood and the children understood instantly: the fleet was waiting to be invited. It would not force its brightness on anyone. It floated, patient as a kept promise, and it waited for a single child to walk down to the very edge of the land and lift one hand.

A child did. Of course a child did. I will tell you about that child in the next chapter, because they deserve a chapter and not a sentence, but for now let me only say that the hand went up, small against all that water, and the nearest hull turned toward the shore

the way a face turns toward a voice it has been hoping to hear, and a gangway came down soft as a tongue of light, and the casting-off — which is a strange thing to call an arrival, but the fleet did everything backward and was right to — the casting-off began.

I was several people, watching. The dreaming-self wept, which the dreaming-self does easily and without shame. The counting-self made a note. The child-self, who has never agreed to stop, climbed down inside me to the low-tide line where the other child stood and looked where they looked, and what we saw — the two of us, the child outside me and the child within — was a doorway the size of a future, and through it, very far and very near, the lit and standing city, waiting to be entered not as a guest but as an heir.

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The Child Who Was Called Mara-of-the-Low-Tide

Every child aboard the fleet had two names, the one their grown people used and the one the tide gave them, and I will use the tide-names throughout this book, because the tide-names are the true ones and because the grown people's names are not mine to spend.

The first child was called, by the tide, Mara-of-the-Low-Tide, and they had earned the name by being always at the water's edge at the hour when the strait pulled back and showed its floor — the slick stones, the green hair of the pilings, the lost and patient objects that the river had been keeping. Mara collected what the low tide offered. Not to own it. To return it to looking. A bottle worn to a soft green coin. A spoon. Once, a key to nothing, which Mara kept for a year and then gave back to the water on a morning when it seemed the water missed it.

Mara did not believe in the island. I want to be precise about this, because it is the wound the whole season was built to heal. Mara did not disbelieve in it the way you disbelieve in a thing that is false. Mara disbelieved in it the way you disbelieve in a thing that is true but not for you — the way a child outside a lit window in winter does not doubt that there is warmth inside, but has revised their idea of themselves to be the kind of creature that lives in the cold, because to keep wanting the warmth was a labour they could no longer afford.

This is what the grown people's cruelest story does. It does not lie to the child outright. It teaches the child to lie to themselves, gently, as an act of self-protection, until the lie feels like maturity. Mara at the low-tide line, not looking up, was a child who had grown too wise too early, who had folded their wanting away into a small flat shape and

slid it under the stones with the other lost objects, where it would be safe from the tide of disappointment.

And then the yellow came, and Mara — who had trained themselves for years not to look up — looked up.

I have wondered since what it cost. To have built the whole architecture of your small life on the principle that the bright thing is not yours, and then to lift your eyes and find the bright thing has come up the river and is waiting, patient, to be invited — by you, specifically you, the child who had decided to be the kind of creature that lives in the cold. The dreaming-self believes it cost Mara everything and gave it back doubled. The counting-self only notes that Mara's hand went up, and that this is the smallest and largest gesture in this entire book, and that everything after it is consequence.

The gangway came down. Mara did not run aboard. Mara walked, slowly, the way you walk toward a thing you have wanted so long that to reach it too quickly would feel like a kind of disrespect to all the years of wanting. At the top of the gangway Mara turned — the Harbormaster, in his launch, saw this and logged it as paused at the rail — and looked back at the low-tide line, at the slick stones and the patient lost objects, at the small flat folded shape of their own wanting that they had hidden there. And then Mara reached down into the place below knowing where the shape was kept, and took it out, and unfolded it, and it was enormous; it had never been small; it had only been folded; and Mara carried it aboard the yellow house unfolded and entire, and the fleet, sensing it, brightened — the Harbormaster confirms a change in the light that he could not account for — and we cast off into the season.

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The Play of the Cloud-Crested House

Plate I — The House That Wears a Crown of Clouds. The first theatre, docked against the southern shore, the Brooklyn Bridge to the west and the lit island to the east; through its great open front the strait is visible, and the towers stand framed like painted scenery that has decided to be real.

The first theatre was the cloud-crested house, and it was the simplest of the fleet, and the children who do not yet trust brightness need a simple thing first.

It was a single great room, open on the side that faced the island, so that the city was not shown on a screen or painted on a flat but stood there, actual, beyond the frame of the open wall, lit by the actual sun. This was the fleet's whole genius and I will say it once here so that you carry it through every chapter: the fleet never represented the island. It framed it. It built, around the real and standing city, a doorway of yellow, and it said to the children: look — not at a picture of the possible, but at the possible itself, which has been standing across this water your whole life, and which we have only now surrounded with a frame so that you cannot any longer pretend you do not see it.

On the roof of the cloud-crested house there sat a crest of soft round shapes, pale and curved, and the children argued happily about what they were. The counting-self heard a child say they were clouds the house had caught. Another said they were the tops of thoughts. Another, very small, said they were the house's crown, because the house was a king, and a fourth corrected them — not a king, that small grave correcting voice, a king is somebody who rules, this house does not rule, it invites, so it is not a crown it is a welcome, and the house wears its welcome on its head where everyone can see it. I have

thought about that child's distinction often. The house wears its welcome where a crown would go. That is the entire politics of the yellow fleet in a single child's sentence.

Inside, on the bright floor, there were two round openings, two perfect circles cut low in the inner walls, just the size for a child to climb through, and beyond them — framed again, the fleet was always framing — the water and the far shore. The children went to the round doors and looked through, and what they saw was the island made circular, made into the shape of an eye, or a coin, or the porthole of a ship that is going somewhere. I will tell you about the round doors in the next chapter, because Mara found something in one of them.

But first the play. The first play was barely a play. The fleet was wise; it did not begin with story, which is a rich food, but with a single image, the way you begin a child on bread. The players — and I should say now that the players were also children, that there was never any separation aboard the fleet between those who watched and those who performed, that the audience was forever discovering it had walked onto the stage — the players stood in the great open front, between the children and the lit island, and they did the simplest thing. They looked at the city. That was the play. They stood and looked at the towers across the water, and they looked with such open and unguarded wanting, such complete refusal of the trained indifference that the grown people call maturity, that the watching children felt the trained indifference cracking in their own chests like ice on a pond when the warmth comes up from underneath.

To look at the bright thing and want it openly, in front of others, without shame — this is the first and hardest thing the fleet taught, and the cloud-crested house taught it with a single held gaze across the water. By the time the players turned back from the city to face the audience, half the watching children were weeping, and did not know why, and were not ashamed of that either, which was the proof that the lesson had taken.

Mara did not weep. Mara, who had folded their wanting away for years and only just unfolded it, was not yet ready to spend it on tears. Mara watched the players look at the city and Mara looked too, and somewhere in the looking Mara stopped being the child who lives in the cold and became, again, simply a child, with the whole catalogue of wanting open in their chest, and it hurt, and it was the good hurt, the hurt of a folded thing remembering its true size.

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The Room With Two Round Doors

Plate II — The Theatre of Two Storeys and the Pink Rake. A later vessel of the fleet, two storeys with a great ground-arch and an upper room reached from within; a soft pink ramp spills from one side toward the deck. Shown here for the round openings that recur through the fleet like a rhyme.

There were two round doors in the cloud-crested house, low in the inner wall, and the children went through them on their hands and knees and came out the other side changed in a small way, the way you are changed by going through any true threshold.

Mara went to the left-hand door and did not go through. Mara knelt in front of it and looked, and through the circle of it saw the island, made round, and in the centre of the round island, very far away, a single tower catching the light. And Mara — who collected what the low tide offered and returned it to looking — understood, kneeling there, that the round door was doing to the city what Mara had spent their whole childhood doing to bottles and spoons and keys to nothing. It was taking a thing that the grown world had decided was not for looking-at — the city as a machine, the city as somebody else's brightness — and it was framing it, circling it, returning it to looking. The round door was a low-tide child made of yellow wood. It and Mara were the same kind of thing.

This is the moment, if I had to mark one, when Mara began to belong to the island. Not to possess it — the fleet never taught possession, the fleet was the enemy of possession, the grown people's machine is built of possession and the fleet was its opposite. But to belong to it, which is a different verb entirely, which goes both ways,

which means the island belonged to Mara exactly as much as Mara belonged to the island, which is the only kind of belonging that does not become a cage.

I want to stay in this small kneeling moment because the whole book turns on it and the book will not have many moments this quiet again; the season grows louder and brighter and more crowded with wonders as it goes, and that is right, that is how a season should go, but the turn happens here, in the hush, with one child on their knees at a round door looking at a far tower through a circle of yellow.

There is a thing the dreaming-self believes and the counting-self will not endorse, and I will give it to you as the dreaming-self's alone. The dreaming-self believes that the tower Mara saw, framed in the round door, was already wearing Mara's face. That the future-self was there from the first day, from the first frame, waiting at the far end of the circle, and that everything the fleet did across the whole season was only the slow work of bringing Mara close enough to that distant tower to see whose face it wore. The counting-self says: a child knelt at a round opening and looked at a building. Both of these are true. Believe the child.

When Mara finally went through the round door — and they did, at the very end of the first docking, when the light was going gold and the players were singing the small wordless song the fleet sang at each casting-off — they came out the far side onto a part of the deck they had not seen, and the city was there, no longer round, no longer framed, simply standing across the bright water being itself, and Mara stood and looked at it without the frame, which is the hardest looking of all, and did not fold their wanting away, and that was the end of the first day and the beginning of Mara's belonging.

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The Stepped Yellow and the Cardboard Castle

Plate III — The Stepped Pavilion of the Open Gable. Broad amphitheatre steps descend to the deck beneath an open gabled frame; within, a small cylindrical play-structure and, on the boards below, a child's red-and-white castle of folded card. The Brooklyn dockings favoured these wide, low, welcoming steps.

The third theatre of the first docking was all steps. It was a wide low pavilion, a great gabled frame thrown open to the island, and beneath the frame the floor came down to the deck in broad shallow yellow steps, the kind you can sit on, lie on, roll down, the kind that are not for climbing to somewhere but for being somewhere, and the children covered them like petals fallen on water.

On the boards below the steps, that first docking, some child had built a castle of folded card, red and white, a small bright wreck of a thing, abandoned now for the larger wonder of the fleet. I noticed it. The counting-self noticed it and made a note and the note has bothered me ever since, because the cardboard castle is the whole grief of the book in miniature. A child had built, out of what they had, a small bright place — and then the fleet had come, enormous and yellow and full of the future, and the child had left their handmade castle on the boards to climb aboard the given wonder. And I find I cannot decide whether this is joy or loss. The dreaming-self says joy: the child has traded a small made thing for a vast given one. The counting-self says loss: a thing made by a child's own hands lies abandoned on the boards. The child-self, who has never agreed to stop, says: you are both wrong and both grown, the castle is not abandoned, the castle is waiting, the child will come back for it when the fleet has gone and will build it taller, having seen what tall can be.

I have decided to believe the child-self. The cardboard castle is not the past the child left behind. It is the practice the child did before they knew what they were practising for. Every small bright thing a child makes is a rehearsal for the vast bright thing they will one day be allowed to want. The fleet did not come to replace the children's making. The fleet came to show the children what their making was always reaching toward.

The play on the stepped pavilion was about this, though it did not announce itself as being about anything. A child-player came down the broad steps carrying a small folded thing — card, or cloth, the counting-self could not see from the deck — and set it down in the centre of the open gable, between the audience and the lit island, and unfolded it, and it was a tiny city, a little model of towers made by a child's hands, crooked and bright and wrong in all the proportions and more beautiful for being wrong. And then the child-player stepped back, and the real city stood behind the small one, framed in the gable, the great true towers rising behind the crooked handmade ones, and for a moment — the Harbormaster saw this from his launch and has never been able to explain it — the small city and the large city were the same size. The handmade towers and the standing towers occupied, from the angle of the watching children, exactly the same height of sky.

This is what the fleet was always doing. It was arranging the angles of looking so that the child's making and the world's making stood the same height. It was teaching the children that the distance between the crooked card tower in your hands and the lit steel tower across the water is not a difference of kind but only of when. You are not a different species from the future. You are the future, earlier. The crooked card city is the lit city, younger. Give it time and angle and a frame of yellow and the two will stand the same height in the sky.

Mara sat on the broad steps and watched the two cities stand level, and I, who was several people on the deck and one child within Mara watching out through Mara's eyes, felt the last of the folded wanting come fully open, and it was so large that it frightened the grown selves and delighted the child ones, and the first docking turned toward its evening.

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What Mara Saw in the Skyline

On the last evening of the first docking, when the light had gone the gold that the strait keeps for endings, the fleet did the thing it had been building toward, the thing it would do at every docking, the thing that is the true subject of this book beneath all the yellow and all the wonder. It showed a child their future-self in the skyline.

I must tell you how this was done, because it was not magic, though it has been called magic by people who were not aboard, and it was not a trick, though the counting-self examined it for trickery with all the rigour of a self that wants the catalogue correct. It was done with looking, and with frame, and with the patient arrangement of angle that the fleet had been practising on the children all day. It was done by teaching a child to look at the lit city with such complete and unashamed wanting that the wanting itself became a kind of recognition.

Here is what happened. As the light went gold, the players brought Mara to the open front of the cloud-crested house — gently, the fleet did everything gently — and they stood Mara at the very edge of the frame, where the yellow ended and the bright air began, and they pointed Mara's looking across the water at the city. And they asked Mara — one of the child-players asked, in the small grave voice the fleet's children used for the true questions — which one is yours.

Mara did not understand the question and then understood it entirely, the way you do with the true questions. Which tower, across the water, is yours. Not which one would you like. Not which one will you be given. The grown people's question is always will you be given; the fleet's question was only ever which is yours, already, waiting. Which of those upright futures has been standing there your whole life with your name kept warm inside it.

And Mara looked. Mara, who had spent years training not to look up, looked across the gold water at the standing city with the whole unfolded catalogue of their wanting open in their chest, and somewhere in the row of lit towers Mara found one — the counting-self cannot tell you which, the dreaming-self says it was the one Mara had seen framed in the round door that morning, and I believe the dreaming-self though I cannot prove it — Mara found one tower, and pointed, and said: that one.

And here is the thing I have to make you believe, because the whole book is worthless if you do not believe it: Mara was right. There was a future standing in that tower with Mara's face on it. Not a future Mara would be handed. A future Mara already was, at the far end of the strait of years, exactly as the far shore is already there at the far end of the strait of water — you do not have to make it, it is already standing, you have only to be carried to it, twice a day, in whichever direction the moon is feeling. Mara saw their grown self standing lit in the city that the grown people had said was not for them, and the grown self looked back across the water at the child on the yellow deck, and — the dreaming-self insists on this and I will not stop them — the grown self lifted one hand, the way Mara had lifted one hand that morning to invite the fleet ashore, and the gesture went both ways across the water and across the years, the child inviting the future and

the future inviting the child, and the strait carried the invitation both directions at once because that is what straits are for.

Mara wept then. The good hurt, finally spent as tears. And the first docking ended, and the fleet cast off from the southern shore into the bright water, carrying Mara's belonging with it, northward and eastward up the honest strait toward the second shore, where another child stood who kept the names of boats.

❧

Interlude: A Page From the Logbook of the Fleet

The counting-self kept a logbook, because the counting-self must, and I will give you one page of it here, between the dockings, so that you have something to hold that is made of facts while the dreaming-self gathers strength for the second shore.

Item: the fleet draws very little water. This is fact and also figure. A thing that carries the future must not sit deep, or it will run aground on the present, which is always shallower than we think.

Item: the yellow does not fade. The counting-self watched for fading all season, expecting the brightness to dim as brightness does, and it did not dim, and the counting-self has concluded that the yellow is not a pigment applied to the surface but a property of the material all the way through, so that you could cut the fleet in half and find it yellow at the core, the way you would find Mara's wanting large at the core no matter how small it had been folded.

Item: there is no separation aboard between audience and players. The counting-self tried all season to maintain the distinction, because a catalogue requires categories, and the fleet defeated the distinction at every turn. Every child who came to watch was, by the end of the docking, performing; every child who performed had, that morning, come to watch. The counting-self has surrendered the category and recorded only this: aboard the fleet, to look at a thing with enough love is already to be performing it. The watcher and the made are one. This is true of the children and the plays and it is true, the dreaming-self adds, of the children and the city — to look at the lit island with enough love is already to be performing your future in it.

Item: the spheres. At every docking there were spheres — pale, pink, gold, drifting up from the fleet into the bright air like balloons, or bubbles, or thoughts that had grown too buoyant to keep. The counting-self could never determine what they were or what held them up. The children were never troubled by them. A child told the counting-self that the spheres were the questions everyone had stopped asking because the grown

people had said they were childish, and that aboard the fleet the questions got light enough to float again, and that you should never catch one, you should only watch it rise, because a question that has become light enough to float is doing exactly what a question is for. The counting-self has recorded this as the best available explanation and closed the item.

Item: between the first and second dockings, the fleet passed close along the western edge of the island, close under the standing towers, and every child aboard fell silent, and the silence was not fear and it was not awe in the grown sense, the awe that makes you feel small. It was the other awe, the rare one, the awe that makes you feel exactly your true size for the first time — neither small nor large but accurate, a child the precise size of their own enormous wanting, passing in a yellow boat beneath the upright futures, on the honest water, toward the next shore. The counting-self recorded the silence and could not measure it and has left, in the column for its duration, the same blank the Harbormaster left for the bridge.

❧

The Inventory of the Low Tide

Before I leave the first shore I want to set down the inventory of the low tide, because Mara kept one and the counting-self has come to believe it was the first catalogue of the season, the rehearsal for this one, the small handmade practice for the vast given work.

Mara's inventory was of the things the strait gave up when it pulled back, and Mara kept it not on paper but in the order of the keeping — a row of objects on a particular stone, arranged by the date the water had offered them, a museum with one visitor and no walls, washed clean and rearranged twice a day by the tide that was both its curator and its thief. I have thought that every child keeps such an inventory of something, and that the keeping is the first form love takes in us, before we have any larger object to spend it on. You practise on bottle-glass and spoons. You practise on the names of boats. You practise on bridges drawn in the empty blue. And all the practising is for the day the fleet comes up the river and asks you to love something the size of a city, and you find, to your astonishment, that you already know how, that the low tide taught you, that the small lost objects were the scales you played before the music you did not yet know was coming.

Here is the inventory, as the counting-self reconstructed it from Mara's telling, on the last bright afternoon of the first docking, when Mara finally trusted the fleet enough to describe the museum no one had ever been shown.

A bottle worn to a soft green coin: kept for the way it had stopped being a bottle and become only its own colour, the way a person who has been worn a long time by the water of their living stops being their use and becomes only their light.

A spoon: kept because a spoon is a small machine for giving, and the water had given it, so it was a gift that was also a tool for gift-giving, and Mara loved the doubling.

A key to nothing: kept for a year, then returned, because Mara understood that a key's whole nature is to open, and a key that opens nothing is a sorrow, and the kindest thing was to give it back to the largest lock there is, the strait, which everything fits and which opens, twice a day, onto the far shore.

A child's shoe, single, very small: this one Mara did not describe for a long time, and when they did the dreaming-self had to look away, because the single small shoe was the one object in the inventory that Mara had not been able to make into a lesson, the one that stayed only itself, only loss, only a shoe that had belonged to a foot the water had taken somewhere Mara could not follow. Mara kept it anyway. The counting-self has come to believe that the single small shoe is the most important object in this entire book, because it is the proof that Mara's love was real and not a philosophy — that Mara could keep a thing that taught nothing, comforted nothing, redeemed nothing, and was only grief, and keep it tenderly, on its own stone, washed by the same tide as the lesson-objects, loved exactly as much. A love that can only keep what instructs it is not love. Mara kept the shoe. That is how the counting-self knew, that last afternoon, that Mara was ready to be shown the city.

And the city, you understand, is the largest object the strait has ever offered and refused to take back — the one thing in the whole inventory of the harbour that does not wash away at the turn of the tide, that stands, that stays, that is offered every single morning and never once retrieved. The grown people see the city standing and call it permanence and build their machine on it. Mara, who kept the low-tide inventory, saw the city standing and understood it differently: not as the thing that does not wash away, but as the thing the strait loved so much it could not bring itself to take back. The city is the strait's single small shoe. The city is the harbour's grief and the harbour's keeping. And it was kept, all this time, on the far stone, waiting for a child who knew how to love a kept thing to come down to the low-tide line and lift one hand.

❧

The Players Who Were Also the Watched

I have said there was no separation aboard the fleet between the players and the audience, and the counting-self has logged its surrender of the category, and I want,

before the crossing, to tell you the one scene that broke the category for good, because it happened at the first shore and it is the seed of everything the later shores grew.

It was on the stepped pavilion, late, when the light was going. A child had come aboard to watch — only to watch, they were certain of this, they had told their grown people they would only watch — and they had taken a place on the broad steps among the petals of the other children, and the play had begun, the play of the two cities, and the child had watched the crooked card city set down before the real one, and had felt the thing the play was built to make them feel, the level standing of the made and the world-made in the same height of sky.

And then the player who had set down the card city looked up from the stage, across the audience, and met this child's eye, and held out the small crooked handmade thing — held it out across the space that was supposed to separate the watcher from the watched — and asked, without words, only with the holding-out: will you keep this.

And the child, who had come only to watch, found that to receive a made thing held out to you is already to have walked onto the stage. There is no watching the offer of a gift; you are in it the moment it is held out, the offer reaches across and includes you, the way the city across the water reaches across the strait and includes any child brave enough to lift their wanting toward it. The child took the crooked card city in both hands, and stood — stood up from the audience into the play — and was, from that moment, a player, had always been a player, had only briefly imagined themselves a watcher, the way each of us briefly imagines ourselves a watcher of our own life before some held-out made thing reaches across and reminds us that to receive is already to perform, that there is no balcony, that the looking was always a kind of doing, that we are none of us in the audience of the bright thing across the water but all of us, already, whether we have stood up yet or not, in the cast.

This is why the fleet could heal. A medicine you only watch does not heal you. The fleet's whole method was to dissolve the watching — to hold out, to every child who came only to watch, some small made thing across the supposed divide, until the child took it and stood and discovered they had been in the play all along. And the city does this too, the dreaming-self insists, the city holds out its brightness across the water to every child on every shore, and most of the children have been taught to believe they are only watching, only admiring from the dark balcony of the far shore — and the lie is in the balcony, the lie is the balcony, there is no balcony, the offer has already reached across, you are already holding the crooked bright city in both your hands, you have only to notice that you are standing.

❧

On the Word Yellow, Before We Go Further

I have used the word yellow many times already and I will use it many more, and I owe you, before the season carries us too far, an account of what I mean by it, because the counting-self has pointed out, correctly, that a word repeated without examination becomes a coin worn smooth, and I do not want the central coin of this book worn smooth in your hand before you have looked at its face.

Yellow, in this book, is not the colour. Or it is the colour, but the colour is the least of it, the colour is only the door. Let me try to say what is behind the door.

There is a feeling that comes, rarely, usually in childhood and afterward only in ambush — a feeling that the world is not the closed and finished and already-sorted thing the grown people move through, but an open and unfinished and still-becoming thing, a thing with the lid off, a thing you could still affect, a thing that is asking you, specifically you, what it should become. The grown people have a hundred ways of putting the lid back on. They call the feeling naive. They call it a phase. They schedule over it. They price it. And the feeling goes underground in most people by a certain age, and they spend the rest of their lives faintly missing a thing they can no longer name, and they call the missing maturity, and they are wrong.

Yellow is that feeling, given a colour so that the children can find it again. When the fleet came up the river yellow as a struck match, what came up the river was that feeling, made visible, made enormous, made into a fleet of houses so that the children who had begun to lose the feeling could see it floating toward them and remember. The yellow is the lid coming off. The yellow is the world remembering it is unfinished. The yellow is the permission — I called it a permission in the very first line and I will stand by the word against all the smoothing of all the counting-selves in the world — the permission to believe that the bright thing is not yet sorted, not yet closed, not yet decided to be somebody else's, that it is still asking you what it should become.

This is why the yellow does not fade and is the same all the way through the material. A pigment fades because it is only on the surface; the feeling I am describing does not fade, because it is not on the surface of the world, it is the world's actual unfinished nature, which the grown people paint over but cannot remove, which is there at the core no matter how thick the over-painting, which any child can still see and which the fleet came to make visible again. Cut the world in half at any point in any life and you will find it yellow at the core — still unfinished, still asking, still open to becoming — under however many coats of grey the grown people have rolled across its face.

So when I say the fleet was yellow, and the house wore a welcome where a crown would go, and the wanting was large at the core no matter how small it had been folded, and it was always yellow at the core — I mean this one thing, this feeling, this permission, this unfinishedness of the world that is the children's true inheritance and that the whole machine of the grown people is built to make them forget. The fleet came to make them remember. The colour was only the door. Now we can go on, and you will know, each time I say it, what is behind the word.

❧

Act Two

The Second Docking — Queens

Crossing the Tidal Strait

Between the first shore and the second the fleet did not hurry, because the fleet never hurried, because hurry is the grown people's way of pretending that the future is somewhere else and must be reached before it closes, and the fleet knew the future does not close, the future is a far shore already standing, and you reach it by being carried, not by racing.

So the crossing took a day, or two, or as long as the moon required, and the children spent it on the bright decks watching the island turn. This is a thing that only happens on the water and that every child aboard discovered for the first time and never forgot: that an island, watched from a moving boat, turns. The city you have looked at your whole life from one fixed shore — the city as a flat bright wall, a backdrop, a thing with only one face — begins, as you are carried around it, to turn, and to show you that it has sides, depths, a back, a whole hidden architecture of itself that the fixed shore never let you see.

The grown people see the island from one shore and believe they have seen it. This is the root of the cruelest story. You cannot be given by, or barred from, or sorted by a thing you have only seen from one side. The fleet carried the children around the island so that they would learn it had more sides than the grown people's story allowed — that the bright wall was not a wall but a body, that a body has a back, that a thing with a back can be embraced, and that you do not embrace a backdrop, you embrace a body, and the children, carried around the turning island, began without words to embrace it.

I was several people during the crossing, as always, and I will confess that the dreaming-self and the counting-self quarrelled, as they do, about what the turning meant. The counting-self said: the island does not turn, the boat moves, this is parallax, a child's eye deceived by motion. The dreaming-self said: everything you have ever loved you have loved by moving around it until it turned and showed you its further sides; the parallax is not a deception, the parallax is love; a thing only loved from one fixed shore is not yet loved at all. And the child-self, who has never agreed to stop, said: stop arguing, both of you, look, it is turning, and they are right, both shores are the future, the moon will carry us, look. And we looked, all of my selves at once, which is the only time the fleet ever made me single, and the island turned, and we came up on the eastern shore,

where Queens kept its long low waterfront and a child stood among the moored boats keeping their names.

❧

The Child Who Kept the Names of Boats

The second child was called by the tide Ilo, which was short for a longer name the tide murmured and would not quite spell, and Ilo kept the names of boats.

This was Ilo's whole vocation, pursued with the total seriousness that children bring to the vocations the grown people do not yet know to interrupt. Along the Queens waterfront the boats were moored in their hundreds — the working boats, the pleasure boats, the half-sunk forgotten boats — and each one had a name painted on its stern, and Ilo knew them all. Not the boats. The names. Ilo had understood, very early and entirely alone, the thing it takes most people a whole life to learn or never learn at all: that a name is a kind of future folded small. That when you name a boat you are not describing it, you are wishing it forward, you are folding into two or three painted words the entire voyage you hope the boat will have. Wanderer. Second Chance. My Girl's Eyes. Someday. The names along the Queens waterfront were a catalogue of folded futures, and Ilo read them the way Mara collected the low-tide objects — to keep them, to return them to looking, to honour the wanting that someone had folded into a painted word and tied to a piling and left to ride the honest water.

Ilo's grief was different from Mara's, and I must be exact about it, because the fleet healed each child of a different wound and the catalogue of the wounds is the catalogue of all the ways the cruelest story is told.

Mara had been taught that the bright thing was not theirs. Ilo had been taught something subtler and in some ways crueler: that wanting itself was a thing to be kept small. Ilo had heard the grown people laugh, gently, at the names on the boats — at Someday, at Second Chance — laugh the way grown people laugh at a child's drawing, with love, but with the love that diminishes, the love that says how sweet that you still believe in the voyage. And Ilo had concluded, keeping the names in secret, reading them in private, that to want a whole voyage was a childish thing, that the grown and proper way was to want only small reachable things, the next meal, the next day, and to fold the great voyages away into painted words you were not supposed to take seriously. Ilo kept the names because Ilo could not bear to let the great foldings be laughed entirely out of the world. Ilo was the secret keeper of everyone's diminished wanting, a child curator of a museum of voyages that the grown people had agreed not to take.

And then the fleet came up the turning strait, vast and yellow, and it had no name on its stern.

This undid Ilo more than any name could have. A boat with no name. A vessel that did not fold its future into a painted word because — Ilo understood this slowly, over the whole second docking — because the fleet was not folding its future at all. The fleet was unfolded. The fleet was the voyage itself, taken seriously, refused the diminishing laugh, sailing up the honest water as the full and unfolded version of every Someday and Second Chance that Ilo had been secretly keeping. The fleet was what the names were folded versions of. And when Ilo understood this, Ilo did the brave thing, the thing that was for Ilo exactly as large as Mara's lifted hand: Ilo stopped keeping the names small. Ilo walked down the long waterfront to where the yellow vessel waited unnamed and waiting, and Ilo, who had spent a childhood as the secret curator of diminished voyages, climbed aboard the one voyage that had refused to be diminished, and took up, the dreaming-self believes, a new vocation, which was to keep the names large.

❧

The Two-Storey Theatre

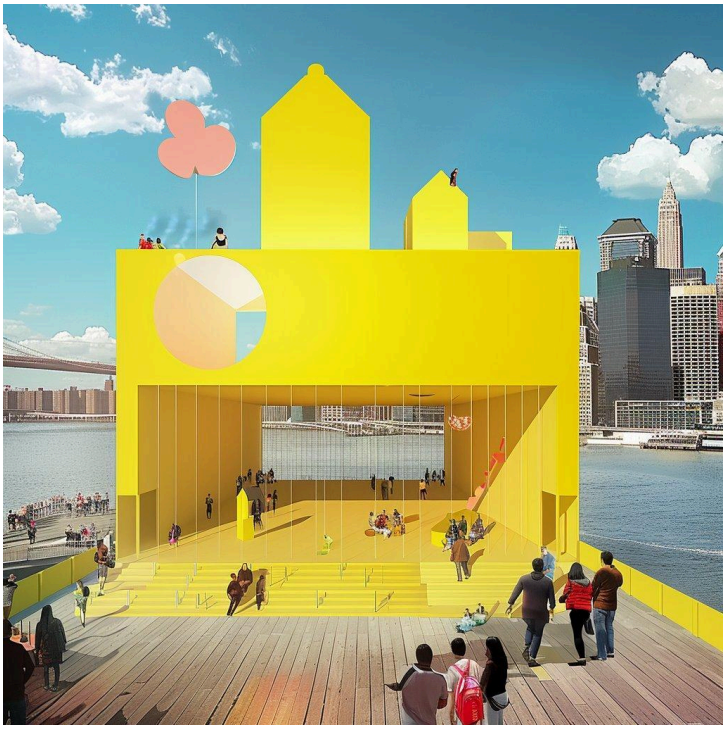

Plate VI — The Two Rings and the Upper Room. A two-storey vessel docked at Queens: a great ground-arch opening through to the island, an upper room reached from within where the second play was held, two pale rings set high on the gable like the eyes of a patient animal.

The theatres of the second docking were taller than the first, because the children of the second shore were ready for height, and height is a kind of wanting made vertical.

The principal vessel of the Queens docking had two storeys. On the ground there was a great arch, taller than the round doors of the first shore, an arch you walked through standing up, and through it — framed, always framed — the island. And above the arch there was an upper room, reached by a stair from within, a room that hung over the water with its own wide window, and it was in the upper room that the second play was held, and the children climbed to it the way you climb to a thing you have earned by wanting it.

I have said the fleet began the children on bread and would feed them richer as they grew, and the second docking was the first rich meal. The play in the upper room had a story, where the first plays had only had images, and the story was about a boat with no name.

A child-player came into the upper room carrying nothing — this was the boat — and the other children gathered, and the player said: I am a boat and I have no name, and I am ashamed, because every other boat on the water has folded its future into a painted word and tied it to itself, and I have nothing painted on me, and so I do not know where I am going. And the gathered children, who had each that morning climbed up from a shore where they kept their wanting folded and small, called out to the nameless boat the names they had been keeping. Someday, called one. Second Chance, called another. My Girl's Eyes, called a third, very softly, because it had been their grandmother's boat. And the nameless boat-child turned to each name as it was called — the way the first hull had turned toward Mara's voice on the first morning — and each time a name was called the boat-child grew, the player rose up taller, until the boat-child stood at their full height in the upper room with the island framed behind them, wearing not one name but all of them, every folded future the children had been keeping, all of them painted at once across a single unfolded child standing tall above the water.

And Ilo, watching, who had kept all those names in secret for so long, heard them called aloud at last, heard the diminished voyages spoken at full size by children who were not ashamed, and Ilo understood that the secret museum could be opened, that the folded futures could be unfolded and called across the water and worn all at once by a child standing tall, and Ilo began — quietly, in the upper room, with the island framed in the great window — to call out the names too, the names Ilo had kept the longest and most secretly, and each one, spoken, rose into the bright air and grew light and floated, and joined the spheres.

The Spiral That Returns You to the Water

Plate XI — The Pinwheel and the Spiral Descent. A vessel whose upper volume turns like a pinwheel above a broad amphitheatre stair, with a spiral that carries the audience down and back to the water. The Queens dockings used these descents to teach that what you climb to, you carry down with you.

There was a vessel at the second docking with a spiral, and I have thought about the spiral more than almost any other single feature of the whole fleet, because the spiral taught the lesson that the grown people most need and least believe.

The vessel was shaped like a pinwheel above and a stair below: a broad amphitheatre of yellow steps coming down to the deck, and above them a turning upper volume, and connecting the two a spiral — a yellow stair that wound down from the high room to the water. And the rule of the spiral, which no one announced but every child obeyed, was this: what you climb to, you must carry down. You did not climb the spiral to escape the water. You climbed it to be high for a while, to see far, to find your future-tower across the strait — and then the spiral turned you, gently, all the way back down to the deck, to the water, to the shore you came from, and you carried what you had seen back down with you.

This is the lesson the grown people will not believe: that the point of climbing is not to stay up. The grown people's machine on the island is built on the opposite faith — that you climb to escape the shore you came from, that height is a leaving, that the tower is a

way out of the borough. And the children of the boroughs are taught this faith young, are taught that to succeed is to leave, that the bright tower is reached by abandoning the low-tide line and the named boats and the cardboard castle, that you must choose between the shore and the height.

The spiral refused this with its whole turning yellow body. The spiral said: climb, yes, climb as high as you can, see as far as your wanting will carry your eye — and then come down, and bring the height with you, and be high on the shore, be a tower that lives at the low-tide line, be a future that did not abandon its borough to arrive. The children went up the spiral and saw their far towers and came down the spiral changed, carrying the height down into the deck, and they did not become smaller for descending. They became, the dreaming-self says, towers that could walk. Futures that kept their shore.

Ilo climbed the spiral on the second day of the Queens docking. From the high turning room Ilo saw the whole eastern waterfront laid out, all the moored boats with all their folded names, and beyond them the island, and Ilo found — we will come to what Ilo found, it belongs to the chapter of the future-self — and then Ilo came down the spiral, slowly, carrying what they had seen, and at the bottom Ilo stood on the deck at the height of an ordinary child and was, the Harbormaster swears he saw this from his launch though he cannot explain it, somehow also still as tall as the high room, a child the ordinary size carrying an extraordinary height down into the everyday water, and Ilo walked off down the gangway to the named boats and the folded futures carrying the tower with them, and did not leave the shore to do it.

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The House With the Pink Cloud

Plate X — The Floating Room With the Sailboats. A broad open hall above a wide amphitheatre stair, a pale pink cloud-shape tethered above it like a held balloon, the island framed across the water and small sailboats on the strait. Shown for the pink cloud, which the Queens children called the kept question.

On the third vessel of the Queens docking there flew a pink cloud.

It was tethered above the open hall, a soft rounded shape of the palest pink, and it was the one sphere of the whole fleet that did not float free — it was held, on a fine line, kept just above the heads of the children like a thought you have decided to keep close rather than let rise. The children called it the kept question, and they were right, and I will tell you what the kept question was, because Ilo asked it and the asking of it was the turn of the second docking.

All season the spheres had been the questions that had grown light enough to float free — the questions the grown people had called childish, set loose at last to rise. But the pink cloud was different. The pink cloud was the one question that the children chose not to let rise, the question they kept tethered close because it was too precious to release, and the question was this: am I allowed.

That is the kept question. Not what do I want — the fleet had taught the children to want openly, across the first shore and into the second. The kept question came after the wanting, in the small hours, in the tethered place close above the head: I want the bright tower, I have found the one with my face on it, I have called my folded names aloud and worn them all at once — but am I allowed. Is the wanting permitted to me, the child of

the far shore, or is wanting itself a trespass, a reaching above my given station, a thing the grown people will laugh gently back down to size.

Ilo asked it. In the open hall, beneath the tethered pink cloud, with the sailboats small on the strait and the island framed across the water, Ilo looked up at the kept question and asked it aloud, which no child had yet dared, because to ask am I allowed aloud is to risk the answer no. Ilo asked: am I allowed to want the whole voyage, the unfolded one, the tower with my face on it — am I allowed, or is it only for the children of the island.

And the fleet answered. Not with a voice — the fleet never used a voice, the fleet was wiser than voices. The fleet answered by cutting the tether. A child-player reached up, when Ilo had finished asking, and cut the fine line that held the pink cloud close, and the kept question rose — am I allowed rose up off the deck and into the bright air and joined the other spheres, the freed questions, the floating wanting — and the answer was in the rising. The answer to am I allowed was: a question this beautiful was never meant to be kept tethered close in fear; a question this beautiful is allowed, is more than allowed, is required to rise; you are allowed, child, you were always allowed, the only thing that was ever forbidden was the keeping of the question small.

Ilo watched am I allowed rise off the deck and grow light and float free over the strait toward the island, and Ilo, who had kept everyone's diminished wanting in a secret museum for a whole childhood, let the last and most secret exhibit rise, and was empty of folded things at last, and full of unfolded ones, and ready for the skyline.

❧

The Balloons That Are Really Questions

Plate VII — The Wide Mouth Beneath the Steeples. A broad-stepped vessel with a great low arch beneath twin gabled steeples and an upper gallery; balloons or spheres drift in the bright air to one side. A Queens vessel, shown for the spheres rising free.

I want to give a whole chapter to the spheres, here at the height of the second docking, because the second docking was where the children stopped being afraid of them and began, instead, to make them.

At the first shore the spheres had been a mystery the children watched. By the second shore the children had understood what they were — the freed questions, the wanting grown light enough to rise — and a child who understands a wonder is no longer content to watch it. A child who understands a wonder wants to make one. And so at the second docking the children began to make spheres, which is to say they began, deliberately, to take the questions they had kept small and heavy and fearful, and to ask them aloud, fully, without the diminishing, until the questions grew light and rose.

This is a thing children can do that grown people have mostly forgotten. To make a question lighter by asking it more fully. The grown people believe the opposite — they believe a question grows heavier the more you ask it, that to dwell on a wanting is to be weighed down by it, and so they advise the children to stop asking, to let the matter drop, to be realistic, which is the grown word for heavy. But the children aboard the fleet discovered the secret the spheres had been demonstrating all along: that a question only grows heavy when you ask it halfway and then stop in shame. Asked all the way, asked to its full size and beyond, asked past the point where the grown people would have

laughed it small — a question grows light, grows buoyant, lifts off the deck of the chest where it had been sitting like ballast, and rises, and floats, and is finally doing the thing a question is for, which is not to be answered but to lift the asker.

The vessel of this chapter had twin steeples and a wide low mouth of an arch, and beneath the arch the children gathered and made spheres all the long bright afternoon. A child would step into the mouth of the arch, with the island framed behind them, and ask a kept question all the way to its full size — why is the bright thing said to be not mine, what would I build if I were allowed to build, who is the tall lit person across the water wearing my own face — and as the question reached its full unfolded size it would lift off the child's chest, visible, a pale or pink or golden sphere, and rise past the twin steeples into the air, and the other children would cheer, not because the question was answered but because it had risen, because one more piece of fearful folded wanting had become light enough to float.

By evening the air above the second docking was full of risen questions, a whole bright drifting weather of them, and the Harbormaster in his launch logged a sky he could not account for, full of soft rising lights, and the children stood on the decks beneath their own freed wanting and were lighter than they had ever been, ballast gone, ready to be carried, and Ilo stood among them having freed the most of all, and turned, when the players asked, toward the skyline, to find which one was theirs.

❧

What Ilo Saw in the Skyline

The fleet asked Ilo the question it had asked Mara, the only question the fleet ever truly asked: which one is yours.

And Ilo, who kept the names of boats, who had learned that a name is a future folded small and that the brave thing is to keep the names large, looked across the strait at the standing city in the gold end-of-docking light, and Ilo did a thing Mara had not done, a thing that belonged to Ilo's particular healing and to no one else's. Ilo read the skyline as a row of names.

Where Mara had seen the towers as upright futures, Ilo saw them as the painted sterns of the largest boats in the world — each tower a name, each name a folded voyage, the whole island a waterfront of moored futures with their names painted up the sky. And Ilo read them. Ilo, the secret keeper, the child curator of diminished voyages, stood on the yellow deck and read the names of the great moored futures painted up the towers of the island, and somewhere in the reading Ilo found one whose name, when Ilo read it, was Ilo's own.

Not Ilo's grown name. Not the longer name the tide would not quite spell. The name painted up that one far tower, which Ilo alone could read because Ilo alone had spent a childhood learning that names are folded futures — the name up that tower was the unfolded version of the voyage Ilo had been keeping smallest and most secret, the someday Ilo had never dared to curate even into the private museum, the voyage so large that Ilo had never folded it into any painted word at all because no stern was wide enough. And there it was, painted up the sky, unfolded, on a tower across the water, with Ilo's face in its lit windows.

Ilo pointed and said: that one. And Ilo was right. There was a future moored across the strait wearing the name of Ilo's largest secret voyage, and it had been moored there Ilo's whole life, and Ilo had walked the waterfront of the wrong shore reading the small folded names of small folded boats and had never once let their eye climb the sky to read the great unfolded names painted up the towers, because the grown people's story had taught Ilo that the sky-names were not for the reading of far-shore children. And now Ilo read them. And one was theirs. And the tall lit future in the windows of that tower looked back across the water at the child on the yellow deck and, the dreaming-self insists, called Ilo's name — the full one, the one the tide could not spell, the future could spell it — called it across the strait at full unfolded size, and it was the most beautiful name Ilo had ever kept, and Ilo got to keep it large, forever, having heard it called by their own grown voice from a tower they had been told was not theirs.

The second docking ended. The fleet cast off from the eastern shore into the bright drifting weather of risen questions, northward up the strait, toward the third shore and the last child, who drew on the sky.

❧

Interlude: The Catalogue-Keeper's Marginalia

The counting-self has been quiet for two dockings, letting the dreaming-self run, and the counting-self wishes to enter a few marginalia before the third shore, in the interest of the catalogue, which must be correct.

Marginalia the first: on the matter of the future-selves. The dreaming-self has now twice asserted that the children saw their actual grown selves standing lit in the actual towers, and has twice insisted that the grown selves looked back and lifted a hand or called a name. The counting-self wishes it recorded that the counting-self saw no grown selves in any window, examined the towers through the launch's glass at the Harbormaster's kind offer, and observed only the ordinary lit windows of an ordinary evening city. The counting-self also wishes it recorded that this proves nothing. The

counting-self has come, over the season, to a position it would not have credited at the outset: that there are things which are true and not visible, that the future-self in the tower is precisely such a thing, that to demand it be visible to the launch's glass is to make the grown people's error of believing that only the logged is real. The counting-self saw nothing in the windows. The children saw themselves. The counting-self now believes the children and has revised its definition of evidence accordingly, which is the largest thing that happened to the counting-self all season and is hereby logged.

Marginalia the second: on the spheres, the counting-self formally withdraws its earlier request for an explanation. Some wonders are not items. The sphere column is closed.

Marginalia the third, and this one the counting-self enters with a care it does not usually permit itself: on the children. The counting-self has been referring to the children as the children, as a category, as a set whose members can be counted, and the counting-self wishes to record its growing unease with this. Mara is not an instance of child. Ilo is not an instance of child. Each child aboard the fleet was, the counting-self has come to see, a single and unrepeatable folding of wanting, healed of a single and unrepeatable wound, shown a single and unrepeatable future wearing their own single and unrepeatable face. The catalogue can hold the plates. The catalogue cannot hold the children. The counting-self has tried all season to make a catalogue of the children and has produced instead this book, which is not a catalogue, which is the counting-self's confession that some things must be loved one at a time and cannot be summed. The dreaming-self, reading over my shoulder, is weeping again, and says it has been trying to tell the counting-self this since the first morning, and the counting-self says yes, all right, you were right, hand me the log, the tide is turning, we are coming up on the northern shore.

❧

The Stair That Climbs Into the Light

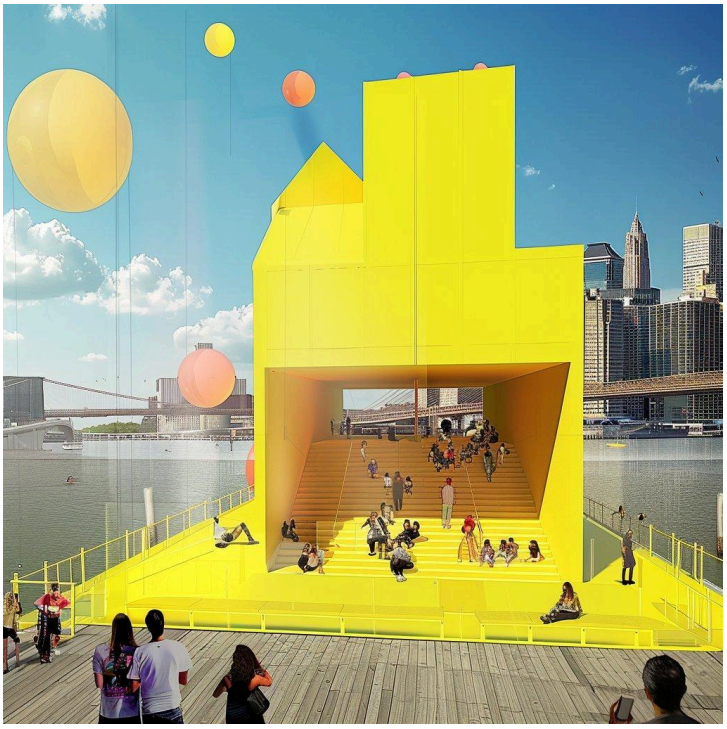

Plate V — The Stair That Climbs Into the Light. A great broad stair rising into a high bright opening, the children ascending together toward the framed light with the island laid out beyond. A Queens vessel; the climb is communal, a whole shore rising at once.

There was a vessel at the second docking that was almost entirely a stair — a great broad ascent rising into a high bright opening, wide enough that a whole shore of children could climb it at once, shoulder to shoulder, and they did, and the climbing-together was the lesson, and I must tell it carefully because it corrects the spiral and is corrected by it, the two vessels speaking to one another across the docking like two selves of one fleet.

The spiral taught: what you climb to, you carry down. But the spiral was a single thread, climbed one at a time, a solitary ascent and a solitary descent, and a child could climb the spiral and find their far tower and come down again and believe, mistakenly, that the climbing was a private matter, a thing each child must do alone, a lonely vocation of the self toward its own future. The broad stair corrected this. The broad stair could not be climbed alone — it was too wide for that, it would have been absurd, a single child on a stair built for a hundred — and so the children climbed it together, and discovered that the ascent toward the bright opening, toward the framed light, toward the future, is not a solitary thread but a broad shared rising, that you do not climb toward your future alone but in a crowd of other children all climbing toward theirs, and that the crowd does not slow you or compete with you but lifts you, that a stair full of climbing children rises faster than an empty one, that the future is not a scarcity to be raced toward up a narrow private spiral but an abundance to be climbed toward up a broad shared stair, wide enough for every child of every shore at once.

The grown people's machine on the island is built on the narrow stair, the private spiral, the faith that there is room at the top for only a few and that the climbing is therefore a race and the other climbers therefore rivals. The broad stair of the second docking refused this with its whole wide yellow body. There is room. There is room at the top of the bright opening for every child who climbs, the stair is wide, the light is wide, the future is wide, and the only thing that ever made it seem narrow was the grown people's story, told to keep the children racing one another up a spiral barely wide enough for one when all along, beside it, there was this — this broad shared rising, this stair you climb shoulder to shoulder into a light with room in it for everyone.

Ilo climbed the broad stair among the crowd of children and felt, for the first time, that wanting the bright thing did not mean taking it from another child, that the curator of diminished voyages could let every voyage be large at once without any voyage crowding out another, that the museum could open all its rooms and turn on all its lights and welcome every visitor and never run short of brightness, because brightness, the broad stair taught, is the one thing that grows more abundant the more of it is wanted, the one resource the machine's whole logic of scarcity does not touch, the inexhaustible yellow at the core.

❧

Interlude: The Dreaming-Self Alone, at Anchor

The counting-self has gone to sleep, and the child-self is curled in the bow watching the lights, and I am, for this one interlude, only the dreaming-self, alone, at anchor between the second shore and the third, and I want to use the solitude to say a thing the other selves would soften, and that should not be softened.

The grown people will tell you this book is a fantasy. They will say it kindly, most of them, in the diminishing way, the way they told Wren the sky-bridges were nothing. They will say: a fleet of theatre-houses does not drift the East River; children do not see their grown selves lit in the towers; a bridge is not made real by the agreement of those who look; the brightness of the island is not, in fact, the inheritance of the children of the boroughs, and to tell them it is, is to set them up for a grief sharper than the one you meant to heal. They will say the cruelest story is not a story but a fact, that the sorting machine is real and the sorting is real and the brightness really is, for most of the children of the far shores, not theirs, and that a kind adult tells the children the truth of this early and gently so that they may make their peace and live within the cold and not break themselves against a window that will not open.

And the dreaming-self, alone at anchor, will answer them, and the answer is the whole reason this self exists.

The machine is real. I have never said otherwise. The sorting is real and the cold is real and the window that will not open is real and the children who break themselves against it are real and I have grieved them, I grieve them now, at anchor, in the dark, between the shores. But the machine is not the island. That is the thing the grown people's kindness gets wrong, the thing that turns their kindness into the cruelest story's most effective instrument. They mistake the machine for the island. They look at the sorting and the cold and the closed window and they say: that is the city, that is the truth of the city, make your peace with it. But the machine is something built on the island by frightened people in a single brief and ending age, and the island is older than the machine and will outlast it, and the island underneath the machine is what it has always been, what every child sees who has not yet been taught to see the machine instead — the shape our longing takes when it is allowed to become very tall, the upright kept futures, the brightness that is the inheritance of every child who can lift their wanting toward it.

To tell a child the machine is the island is the lie. To tell a child the island is theirs beneath the machine, and that the machine is temporary, and that their wanting is the force that will outlast it, is the truth, and it is a harder truth than the grown people's gentle resignation, because it does not let the child make peace with the cold; it requires the child to keep wanting in the cold, which is the most expensive thing a person can do, and the bravest, and the only thing that has ever, once, in the whole history of the species, melted any of the cold at all.

The fleet was not a fantasy. The fleet was a fact told at the right altitude. Everything in this book happened, at the altitude where the true things happen, which is not the altitude of the launch's glass or the harbormaster's ledger but the altitude of the lifted hand, the drawn bridge, the agreed-upon span. I am the dreaming-self and I have stayed up alone at anchor to tell you that I am not the liar of this crew. I am the one who refuses the kindest and most effective lie. The counting-self believes the children now; it learned to, this season; you read its confession. Believe the children. The machine is real and it is not the island and the island is theirs and yours and was always yellow at the core. There. The child-self has fallen asleep in the bow. The tide is turning. I will wake the others. We come up on the northern shore at dawn.

❧

The Vessel of Mirrors That Were Windows

There was a vessel at the second docking that the counting-self could not catalogue, because it did not photograph, because every plate the counting-self attempted of it came back showing only the photographer, and so it has no number and no image and exists only here, in words, which the counting-self has decided is the correct medium for a thing made of looking.

It was the vessel of mirrors that were windows. From outside it seemed an ordinary yellow theatre, broad-fronted, framing the island like the others. But inside, the walls that should have framed the city framed instead the children themselves — they were mirrors, the inner walls, so that a child who came aboard expecting to look out at the bright future across the water found themselves looking, instead, at their own face. And the children were at first disappointed, and then troubled, and then — this was the vessel's slow work — transformed, because they discovered that the mirrors were also windows, that if they looked long enough at their own reflected face the face became transparent, became a window, and through the window of their own face they saw the city after all, the bright island, the standing future, framed now not beside their face but through it, behind it, continuous with it.

This is the hardest of the fleet's teachings and the second docking was right to hide it in a vessel that could not be photographed, because it cannot be shown, it can only be undergone. The teaching is this: that the future-self in the tower across the water and the actual-self looking from the deck are not two things separated by a strait of years, but one thing seen at two depths, and that if you look long enough and bravely enough at your own present face it becomes a window onto your future one, that the bright island is not across the water from you but behind your own eyes, that you have been carrying the lit city inside your own looking the whole time and projecting it across the strait because it frightened you to find it so close, in the mirror, in the face, in the place where the looking comes from.

Ilo went into the vessel of mirrors that were windows and looked at their own reflected face for a long time, longer than any other child that day, because Ilo was the keeper of folded futures and understood that a face is the most folded future of all, the one we carry folded smallest, the one we are most ashamed to unfold and look at directly. And Ilo looked, and the face became a window, and through the window of their own present face Ilo saw — not a tower this time, the tower came later, on the last evening, at the proper asking — Ilo saw only that the looking and the looked-at were one, that the keeper and the kept were one, that there was no strait between Ilo and Ilo's future but only the held breath of not-yet-daring-to-look, and Ilo let the breath out, and the vessel of mirrors that were windows had done its work, and Ilo came out onto the

deck lighter by one more folded thing, the most folded of all, the face, unfolded at last and found to be a window.

The counting-self has left, in the catalogue, no entry for this vessel, and in the place where its plate would go, the counting-self has written: here the reader should put down the book for a moment and look at their own reflected face until it becomes a window. The counting-self means this instruction seriously. The counting-self has never meant anything more seriously. The vessel of mirrors that were windows is reproduced nowhere in this book except in whatever reflective surface is nearest to you now, and the counting-self, who insists the catalogue be correct, insists that this is the most correct entry in it.

❧

Interlude: A Catalogue of the Plays We Did Not Have Time to See

The fleet held more plays than one season could contain, and the counting-self, who grieves every uncounted thing, has assembled here a catalogue of the plays we did not have time to see — the plays glimpsed through other vessels' open fronts as we drifted past, the plays the children of other shores were inside while we were inside ours, the plays that were happening always, in all the hulls at once, more than any single watcher could attend. I give the catalogue in the manner of the counting-self, briefly, each play a folded thing, so that you may unfold whichever ones you need.

The play in which a child gives their shadow permission to be a different colour than themselves, and the shadow, permitted, turns yellow, and walks off across the water toward the island ahead of the child, scouting the future, and comes back at evening to report that it is bright there, that it is safe, that the child may follow.

The play in which all the lost objects of all the low tides of all the children of all the shores are gathered onto one stage and asked what they would like to become, and the bottle worn to a green coin says a window, and the spoon says a hand, and the key to nothing says, very quietly, a door worth opening, and the single small shoe says nothing, and is held, and that is the whole play.

The play in which the children build a machine exactly like the grown people's sorting machine, in miniature, out of card and string, and run it, and watch it sort them, and laugh, because at the small scale where they can see the whole of it at once the machine is so obviously absurd, so plainly a thing somebody built and could therefore unbuild, that its power evaporates, and the children dismantle it for parts and build a carousel.

The play in which a child who has been told they are too much — too loud, too bright, too wanting, too many — is invited to be exactly as much as they are, on a stage built to hold any amount of child, and discovers there is no such thing as too much, that the too-much was only a too-small room, that given a stage the size of their actual being they fit exactly, they are precisely the right amount, they were always precisely the right amount, the rooms were simply built too small by people frightened of the size of children.

The play in which the future and the past sit down on opposite sides of the present like two shores of a strait and discover they are carried back and forth into one another twice a day and have no quarrel, never had a quarrel, were only told they were enemies by the grown people's lie of the single direction, and they shake hands across the present, the future and the past, and the tide carries the handshake both ways.

The play that has no description because it was performed only once, for an audience of one, for a child who needed it and who has never told anyone what it was, and who is grown now, and carries it, and is the better for carrying it, and will not say. The counting-self records its existence and not its content, because some plays are kept the way Mara kept the single small shoe, for no lesson, only for love, and the catalogue must have room for the kept and uncounted things or it is not a true catalogue but only an inventory of the useful, which is the grown people's error, which this whole book has been written against.

❧

The Account-Book and the Song

The counting-self wishes to tell one chapter alone, without the dreaming-self's help, because it concerns the counting-self's own healing, which the counting-self has been shy of, all season, amid the louder healings of the children, and which the dreaming-self has been kindly waiting for the counting-self to be ready to tell. I am ready. Here it is.

I am the self that counts, and I came aboard the fleet with my account-book, because that is what I bring everywhere, and I intended to do with the fleet what I do with everything, which is to render it into figures, to count the hulls and measure the spheres and log the dimensions of the dockings, to make of the whole bright season a correct and balanced account that would, when complete, allow me to say: there, I have understood it, I have it in numbers, it is mine. This is the counting-self's version of the cruelest story, and I confess it: I believed that to count a thing was to possess it, that the account-book was a kind of net, that a wonder rendered into figures was a wonder caught and kept and made safe from the terror of its own unmeasured size.

And the fleet let me count. That was the first kindness, and I did not understand it as kindness at the time — I thought it indifference, I thought the fleet did not notice or care that I was netting it in figures. It let me count the hulls, even as the count would not hold still, even as seven became nine became seven, the fleet let me keep trying, the way you let a child keep trying to catch the sea in a bucket, not because the bucket will ever hold the sea but because the trying is how the child comes to know the sea is larger than any bucket, which is the thing the child most needs to learn and can only learn by failing to bucket it.

And I failed to bucket the fleet. Every count came out different. Every measurement of the spheres returned a different figure. The dimensions of the dockings would not hold still in my book; I would log a stair at so many feet and look again and the figure was wrong, not because I had erred but because the stair was not the kind of thing that has a single figure, the stair was the kind of thing that is a different size depending on how much of a child is climbing it and how much of their wanting they have unfolded, and no account-book has a column for that, and I sat on the deck with my failing book and felt the terror I had built the whole account-book to keep away, the terror of the unmeasured, the uncaught, the wonder larger than any net.

And then the children sang. I have mentioned the small wordless song the fleet sang at each casting-off, and I have not, until now, told you what it did to the counting-self, because I was not ready, but I am ready now. The children sang the wordless song, and it had no figures in it, nothing to count, no beats I could number, no intervals I could log — it was the most uncountable thing I had ever encountered, pure uncaught wonder, the sea entirely out of the bucket — and instead of the terror I had always felt before the uncountable, I felt, for the first time in my long counting life, relief. Relief. Because the song was so completely beyond counting that I could finally, for the length of it, stop. I could put down the account-book. I did not have to net the song; the song could not be netted; and so the song gave me permission to do the thing I had never once done, which was to be in the presence of a wonder without trying to possess it, to let it be larger than me, to let it be uncaught and unmeasured and entirely safe in its own enormous size, safer than anything I had ever caught, because a thing you have caught can be lost and a thing you have let be larger than you can never be lost, it was never yours to lose, it is simply there, enormous, singing, and you are small before it and the smallness is not terror, the smallness is relief, the smallness is the counting-self finally setting down the bucket and looking at the sea.

That is the counting-self's healing, and the dreaming-self may come back now, I have told it, I am not ashamed. I still count. I will count to the end of this book; you will find

me counting in the catalogue, where counting belongs. But I count now the way Mara collected the low-tide objects — not to possess, but to return things to looking, to honour them, to keep them in love. The account-book is not a net anymore. It is an inventory of the low tide. And the things I cannot count — the song, the spheres, the size of a stair under a child's unfolded wanting, the bridge that is dreamed and not built — I leave, now, in the blank column, the way the Harbormaster taught me, which is the correct way to record the truth.

❧

Act Three

The Third Docking — The Bronx

The Northern Reach

The strait grows narrow as it goes north, and the water there has a different temper — quicker, more decided, less willing to drift — and the fleet, coming up into the northern reach, seemed to gather itself, the way you straighten before the door of the house where the thing will finally be said.

I felt all my selves draw closer together as we came north. This had not happened before. All season the dreaming-self and the counting-self and the child-self had run as a loose crew, quarrelling, taking turns, and now, in the northern reach, with the third and last child waiting on the third and last shore, I felt them lean in toward one another, as a family leans in over a small bright thing it is about to be given or to lose. I think the fleet knew the season was ending. I think the children knew. I think the very water knew, the quick decided northern water, hurrying us up toward the last shore and the last child and the thing the whole season had been built to make, which was not a play and not a future-self in a window but something larger that I did not yet have the shape of and that the last child, who drew on the sky, would draw for all of us.

The island, as we came north, showed us its last and least-seen side. The grown people who know the island know its southern tip, the famous bright wall of it, the postcard. Fewer know its eastern body, which the children of Queens had been carried around. Almost no one truly looks at its northern reaches, the long quiet upper miles where the towers thin and the island stops performing and simply is, the way a person is when they think no one is watching. The fleet carried the children up alongside the island's unwatched northern self, and the children saw the city with its performance set down, the city resting, the city as a body that has been standing upright and lit for so long that to see it quiet in the northern light was almost unbearably tender, the way it is tender to see someone you have only known in their brightness suddenly tired, suddenly real, suddenly available to be loved rather than only admired.

And on the northern shore, against this quiet last side of the island, a child stood with their face to the sky, drawing.

❧

The Child Who Drew on the Sky

The third child was called Wren by the tide, and Wren drew on the sky.

Not on paper. Wren had paper, the grown people had supplied paper, the grown people are always supplying paper, but Wren had understood early and alone that paper was too small for the things Wren needed to draw, and so Wren drew on the sky, with a finger, or with the whole arm, or sometimes with just the eyes, tracing on the blue and the cloud the shapes that would not fit on any sheet. Wren drew bridges, mostly. This is the fact the whole season had been reaching toward and I will set it down plainly: the third child, the last child, drew bridges on the sky, had been drawing bridges on the sky their whole short life, bridges from the shore to the island, bridges no one would build, bridges the grown people could not see because the grown people had stopped looking at the sky for anything but weather.

Wren's wound was the deepest of the three and the hardest to say. Mara had been taught the bright thing was not theirs. Ilo had been taught to keep their wanting small. Wren had been taught — and this is the deepest cut the cruelest story makes, the one it saves for the children who are most dangerous to it, the makers, the ones who might actually build — Wren had been taught that the things they made were not real. That a bridge drawn on the sky is not a bridge. That what you make with your finger on the blue does not count, does not hold weight, cannot be walked upon, is only a child's gesture in the empty air. Wren had been drawing bridges from the shore to the island since before they could speak the word bridge, and Wren had been told, gently, lovingly, in the diminishing way, that these were not bridges, that the sky cannot hold a bridge, that real bridges are built by grown people with steel and permits and a year they are opened, and that Wren's bridges, however beautiful, were nothing — were air, were gesture, were the sweet unreal making of a child.

And Wren had almost believed it. That is the terrible thing. By the time the fleet came up the northern reach, Wren had nearly finished the work the grown people's story does on its most dangerous children: Wren had nearly stopped drawing. The arm went up to the sky less often. The finger traced fewer spans. Wren stood on the northern shore on the morning the fleet arrived with their hand half-raised toward the blue and then lowered, half-raised and then lowered, a child unlearning their own most essential gesture, a maker being talked out of making, the most expensive loss in the whole catalogue of losses, because a maker talked out of making is a future that will not get built, a bridge that will not span, a linkage that will not link.

And then the fleet came up the quiet northern water, against the resting island, and Wren saw it, and Wren's hand went up toward the sky and did not lower, because the fleet — Wren understood this in the place below knowing, instantly, the way Mara had

understood the round door and Ilo the nameless stern — the fleet was a thing a child had made that had been allowed to become real. The fleet was a sky-drawing that held weight. The fleet was the yellow vast unfolded proof that the things children make are real, are buildable, can be walked upon, can carry the future up the honest water, and Wren stood on the northern shore with their hand raised to the blue and wept the good hurt and did not lower the hand, and the last docking began.

❧

The Tower and the Peaked Aperture

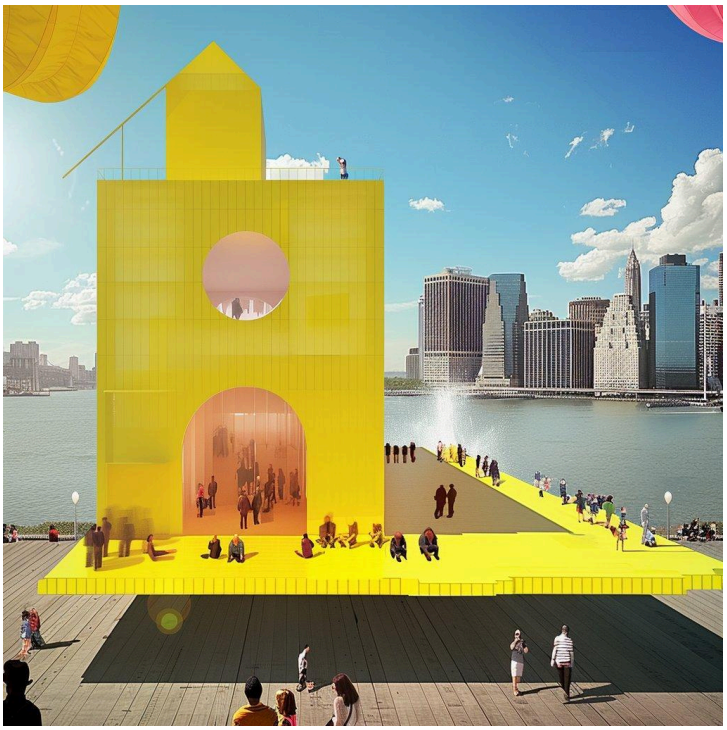

Plate VIII — The Theatre With the Glowing Arch. A tall slab tower beside a peaked central pavilion, the gable opening upward into an inverted V through which the sky itself becomes a doorway. The Bronx vessels reached highest, toward the children who drew on the sky.

The theatres of the third docking reached highest, because the children of the third shore needed to be met at the height of the sky they drew on, and the principal vessel of the Bronx docking had a tower and a peaked aperture, and the peaked aperture was the most important opening in the whole fleet.

All season the fleet had framed the island. The round doors of Brooklyn framed it as an eye, a coin, a porthole. The great arches of Queens framed it as a doorway you could walk through standing up. But the peaked aperture of the Bronx vessel framed something the other openings had not dared to frame. It opened upward. It was an inverted V cut into the gable, a peak, a doorway in the shape of the top of a drawn house,

and through it you saw not the island but the sky — the open blue, the very surface Wren drew on — and the fleet had made, at last, a frame around the thing the maker-children needed framed, which was not the future-city but the medium of making itself, the empty buildable blue.

This is subtle and I must go slowly, because the third docking's whole healing lives here. The first two children had needed to be shown that the future was real and theirs — a tower across the water, a name painted up the sky. They needed the made thing pointed to. But Wren did not doubt the future was real. Wren doubted that Wren could make it. Wren's wound was not at the far end of the looking, in the city; Wren's wound was at the near end, in the hand, in the raised arm, in the finger that traced bridges on the blue and had been told the tracing was nothing. And so the fleet, for Wren, did not frame the city. The fleet framed the sky. The fleet built, around the empty buildable blue that Wren drew on, a doorway of yellow, and it said: look — the surface you have been told is empty, the air your bridges are nothing in, we have framed it, we have put a door around it, and a thing you put a door around is a place, and a place can be entered, and a thing that can be entered is real. Your sky is real, child. We have framed it to prove it. Now draw.

And Wren, standing beneath the peaked aperture with the buildable blue framed in yellow above them, raised the hand that had been half-lowering all season, and drew. Wren drew a bridge on the framed sky. And the fleet's children, watching, did the thing that healed Wren entire: they looked where Wren drew, all of them at once, they followed the finger up into the framed blue and they saw the bridge, they agreed on the bridge, they pointed at the span Wren had traced and said there, and there, and the arch comes down there — and a thing that a crowd of children agree they can see, a thing that is pointed at by many hands and confirmed, is no longer nothing, is no longer a child's gesture in the empty air. It is a made thing that holds weight in the only place weight finally matters, which is in the agreement of those who look. Wren drew a bridge on the sky and the children made it real by seeing it, and Wren understood that this was what making had always been, that the grown people had lied, that a bridge is real when enough people agree to walk it, and that the steel comes after, the steel is only the agreement made heavy, the steel is the last and least important step, the first step is the finger on the blue and the second step is the other children saying there.

❧

The Theatre That Floated Free

Plate XII — The Cliff of Steps. A tall vessel with a great glowing inner arch above broad amphitheatre steps, an upper gallery crowded with children, the island and the bridge framed beyond. A Bronx vessel, shown for the upper gallery from which the future was nearest.

There was a vessel at the last docking that floated entirely free of the shore — the only one of the fleet that did not touch land at any point, that held its place out on the quick northern water by some means the counting-self could not log, near but not against the shore, so that to reach it the children went out across a narrow span of bright water on a yellow gangway that seemed, the Harbormaster swears, to rest on nothing.

The children loved this vessel best of all the fleet, and Wren loved it most, because it was the proof made largest: a whole theatre, vast and yellow and full of children, resting on nothing, held up by — the children had a word for it by the third docking, they said the floating theatre was held up by being agreed upon, that it floated because everyone aboard agreed it floated, that it was the first building in the history of the world made entirely of agreement and yellow and the refusal to ask what held it up. And Wren, who had drawn bridges on the blue and been told they were nothing, walked out across the gangway that rested on nothing onto the theatre that floated on agreement, and was, for the length of that crossing, entirely healed, because Wren was walking on a made thing that held weight and was made of the same stuff as Wren's sky-bridges — agreement, attention, the willingness of many to look where one points and say there.

The play on the floating theatre was the last full play of the season, and it was about a bridge.

A child-player stood at one edge of the floating theatre, and another at the far edge, and between them was the open air above the water, and the first child raised a hand and drew, on the empty blue between them, a bridge — finger tracing the span, the rise, the long descent to the far edge where the second child waited. And then the first child began to walk across. Across the open air. Across the drawn bridge. And the watching children held their breath, because a child was walking out onto a bridge made of nothing but a finger's gesture on the blue, and the grown people's whole story said the child would fall, that the drawn bridge was nothing, that the air would not hold — and the child did not fall. The child walked across the drawn bridge through the open air above the water to the far edge where the second child waited, and the two of them met in the middle of the span that was made of nothing but agreement and attention, and they embraced, and the watching children roared, because the bridge had held, because the made thing had held weight, because a child had drawn a bridge on the sky and then walked across it and not fallen, and this is impossible, and it happened, and the Harbormaster logged it, and in the column for how it was possible he left the blank he had learned to leave.

I will not tell you how the child walked across the open air. The counting-self does not know. The dreaming-self knows and will not say, because to say it would be to make it heavy, and the whole point is that it was light. I will tell you only what it meant, which is the thing the whole season had been reaching toward and which the next chapters and the coda will finally make plain: that a bridge is real when you are brave enough to walk on it, that the children of the boroughs have been drawing bridges to the island their whole lives and being told the bridges are nothing, and that the bridges are not nothing, the bridges will hold, you have only to be brave enough to step out onto your own drawn span and walk, and Wren, watching the child cross the air, knew that Wren would be the one to step out next, and so would all the children, and so, the dreaming-self believes, will you.

❧

The Slide Into the Garden of Eggs

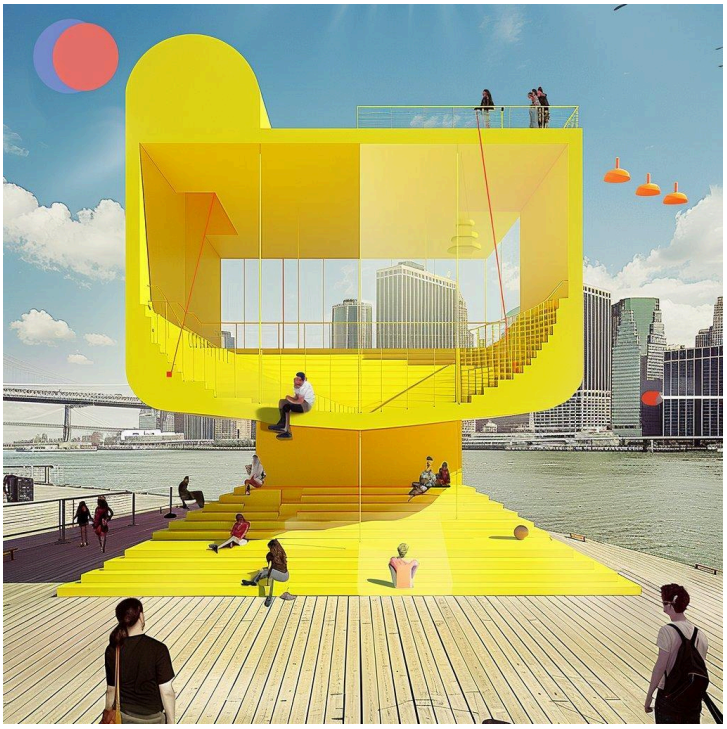

Plate XIII — The Hall of the Hanging Lamps. A vast vessel seen from above and within, an upper viewing deck and a lower hall scattered with bright soft forms, hanging lamps, the island framed beyond. Shown for the descent the Bronx children called the slide into the garden, where the season's joy crested.

Before the last child saw their future-self in the skyline, the season crested into pure joy, and I must give that joy a chapter, because a book about radical joy that arrives at its ending only through healing and lesson and the mending of wounds would be a book that did not understand its own subject. The wounds were real and the mending was real. But the fleet was not, finally, about the wounds. The fleet was about the joy on the far side of the wounds, the radical joy, the joy that is not the absence of grief but the thing grief was clearing a space for, and at the third docking, before the end, that joy crested, and it crested as a slide, and a garden, and a great soft tumbling descent into bright round forms.

One of the last vessels had within it a long descent — the children called it the slide into the garden — that ran from a high opening down a long bright yellow chute into a lower hall that was scattered, the counting-self logged this with delight it did not bother to hide, with great soft round forms, pink and gold and pale, like eggs, or moons, or the spheres come down to earth and grown gentle, a whole garden of soft round buildable forms that the children tumbled down the slide into and among.

And the joy of it — I was several people on the high opening watching the children tumble down into the garden of soft round forms, and for once all my selves laughed at

once, the dreaming-self and the counting-self and the child-self, laughed the single laugh the fleet could sometimes make of my crew — the joy of it was the joy of a wanting that has been freed of its fear and freed of its smallness and freed of its doubt and has nothing left to do but play. Mara had been freed of the lie that the bright thing was not theirs. Ilo had been freed of the smallness, the folding. Wren had been freed, was being freed, of the deepest lie, that the made thing is not real. And on the far side of all three freedoms there was nothing left but this: a garden of soft round forms at the bottom of a bright slide, and children tumbling down into it shrieking with the particular joy that only comes after a fear has been put down, the joy that is not the opposite of the grief but its harvest.

This is radical joy and I will define it once, here, at its cresting, so the word is not loose. Radical joy is not cheerfulness. Cheerfulness is what the grown people perform to keep the machine pleasant. Radical joy is the joy that has gone down to the root — radical is from the root, the counting-self insists on the etymology and is for once welcome to it — the joy that has gone all the way down to the root of the grief and found, growing there, in the very place the wound was, the soft bright buildable garden. You do not get to the garden of eggs except by the slide, and you do not get to the slide except by climbing the vessel of the wound, and you do not climb the vessel of the wound except by being brave enough to look at the bright thing and want it and call your names large and draw your bridge on the sky and walk out onto it. The joy is real because the grief was real. The garden grows where the wound was. That is radical joy, and the children tumbled down into it shrieking, and the Harbormaster in his launch heard the shrieking across the quick northern water and logged, in the column for the sound, the single word: joy, and then, being an honest man, crossed it out and wrote: more than I have a word for, and left it.

❧

What Wren Saw in the Skyline

And so to the last asking, on the last evening, on the last shore, with the season gone gold and ending. The fleet asked Wren the question it had asked Mara and Ilo, the only question the fleet ever asked: which one is yours.

But Wren did not look at the towers. This is the turn of the whole book and I have been carrying it toward you since the first page; here it is. The first two children, asked which one is yours, had looked at the standing city and found a tower. Mara found a future standing upright. Ilo found a name painted up the sky. But Wren, the maker, the child who drew on the sky and had just been shown that the things children make are

real — Wren, asked which one is yours, did not look at the towers that were already there.

Wren looked at the empty air between the towers, and drew.

Do you see it? The first two children found their future-self among the things that already stood. But the maker-child's future-self was not among the standing things, because the maker's future is not a thing that stands waiting to be claimed — the maker's future is a thing that does not yet exist and must be made, and Wren's future-self was not in any tower but in the empty buildable air between the towers and the shore, in the place where Wren had been drawing bridges their whole life, and when the fleet asked which one is yours Wren raised the hand that had spent a season learning not to lower, and drew, across the gold end-of-season air, the largest bridge Wren had ever drawn, a bridge from the northern shore to the resting island, and said: that one. That one is mine. Not a tower. The bridge. I am the bridge. The thing I make is the thing I am, and the thing I make is the linkage, and the future-self I see in the skyline is not standing in it, the future-self I see in the skyline is the span that joins the shore to it, and that span does not exist yet, and I am going to make it, and it will hold, because you have taught me that the things I make are real.

And the children, who had healed Wren by looking where Wren pointed and saying there, looked now where Wren drew, all of them, all the children of the whole season, Mara among them and Ilo among them, all the children of all three shores who had gathered for the last evening, they followed Wren's drawing finger out across the gold air and they saw the bridge Wren drew, the great span from the shore to the island, and they pointed, all of them, every hand, and they said there, and there, and the arch comes down there — and the bridge, made of nothing but a child's drawing and the agreement of every child who looked, began, the Harbormaster swears it, the Harbormaster logged it and crossed out nothing this time, the bridge began to hold.

❧

The Yellow House Set Down Like a Toy

Plate IX — The Yellow House With the Pink Moons. A vessel in the full shape of the child's-drawing house — gabled body, chimney, central door — set down on the boards like an enormous toy, pink moons resting against its face, the bright interior open to the borough children.

Among the last vessels there was one that was not a stage at all, or did not seem to be, and the children loved it with a different love than they gave the others, a quieter and more dangerous love, and I have saved it for near the end because it carries the season's most difficult tenderness.

It was a house. Only a house. The full and unmistakable shape every child draws — the gabled body, the chimney leaning slightly as chimneys do in children's drawings, the door set square in the middle like a held breath, the round windows — built enormous and set right down on the boards of the northern shore, not floating, not framing the city across the water, not theatrical in any way the counting-self could log. A house. With pink moons resting against its bright face like the spheres had come close and decided to stay. And inside, through the open front, the borough children gathered in the warm yellow interior and did nothing — that was the dangerous tenderness — they did nothing, they were simply home, in a home the exact shape of the one they drew when you gave them a crayon and the single word.

And here is why the love was dangerous. All season the fleet had pointed across the water. Look — the city, the future, the tower with your face, the bright thing that is yours. The fleet had been a machine of longing pointed at the far shore, teaching the

children to want what stood across the strait. And it was right to, and the wanting was the healing, and I would not unsay a word of it. But there is a danger in a season of pointing across the water, and the danger is that a child might learn to locate the bright thing always elsewhere, always across, always in the far standing future, and might come to feel that the shore they stand on now, the home they live in now, the borough that bore them, is only the dark balcony from which the brightness is wanted — only the place you long from, never the place that is itself bright.

The yellow house set down like a toy was the fleet's correction of its own season. It said: the bright thing is also here. The future is also home. The yellow at the core is not only across the water in the tower with your grown face; it is also right here, in the house the shape of your own drawing, on the shore that bore you, in the borough the grown people taught you to want to escape. You do not have to cross to the island to enter the brightness. The brightness has also come home, has set itself down on your own boards in the shape of the house you have drawn your whole life, and you may simply go inside, and be home, and that is not a lesser brightness than the tower across the water, it is the same yellow, the same permission, the same inexhaustible light, only it has come close, only it has come home, only it has set itself down like a toy a giant child left for you on the shore where you already live.

Wren went into the house set down like a toy and sat in the warm yellow interior and did nothing, and it was, Wren said afterward, the most important nothing of the whole season, because it was the nothing that taught Wren that the bridge Wren would draw was not a bridge of escape — not a span for fleeing the borough to reach the bright island — but a bridge of belonging, a span that would let the brightness of the island and the brightness of the home flow both ways across the water until they were one brightness, until there was no longer a dark shore and a bright island but only one lit body of belonging with a yellow bridge for a spine. Wren learned the shape of the coda's bridge inside the house set down like a toy, learned it by sitting still in the home-brightness and feeling it be equal to the tower-brightness, learned that the linkage must run both ways or it is only another machine for sorting the children into those who escaped and those who stayed. The bridge would carry the island home and carry the home out to the island. Wren learned this doing nothing, in a yellow house, with pink moons against its face, on the last shore, near the end of the season, and then Wren got up and went out to draw it.

❧

The Twin Gables Leaning In

Plate XIV — The Twin Gables and the Round Eye. Two gabled volumes leaning toward one another above a broad stepped base, a round eye set high in one gable, festival shapes in the bright air. A Bronx vessel; the leaning-together is the book's closing posture.

There was a vessel at the last docking with twin gables that leaned toward one another, two peaked yellow volumes inclining together over the open arch between them, and a round eye set high in one gable looking out across the whole turning island, and this vessel is the one the counting-self asked to have catalogued last among the theatres, before the coda, because the counting-self said it is the posture of the book, it is the shape we end in, and the counting-self was right, and I will let the image stand almost without gloss because some images should be allowed to be their own meaning.

Two gables leaning in. Two selves of a single fleet, inclining toward one another over a bright thing held in the open arch between them. The dreaming-self and the counting-self, who quarrelled all season and learned, by the season's end, to lean. The borough and the island, inclining toward one another across the strait until the space between them became not a division but an embrace, an arch, a held openness with room in it for the whole festival of the freed and floating wanting. The child and the future-self, leaning toward one another across the years until the lifted hand of the one met the lifted hand of the other in the middle of the open arch of time.

And the round eye, high in the gable, looking out — the low-tide child's gesture grown tall and set into the very peak of the leaning house, the circle that takes the world and returns it to looking, raised now to the height where it can take in not a single far

tower but the whole island at once, the city loved from every side, the backdrop become a body, the body become beloved, the eye that does not sort or measure or admire from a balcony but simply, wholly, at the height of the leaning gables, looks — and loves what it looks at, because by the last docking the children had learned that to look at the bright thing with enough love is already to be performing it, that the eye is not a balcony but a stage, that there is no watching, that the round eye high in the gable is not observing the island but, by the only law that finally matters, making it, agreeing it, holding it up.

Festival shapes scattered in the bright air around the twin leaning gables, the last of the freed questions and the first of the season's pure celebrations, indistinguishable now, the wanting and the joy become one drifting weather, and the children gathered on the broad stepped base beneath the leaning gables and were, for the last full evening before the coda, simply happy, with the radical happiness that is the harvest of all the season's grief, and the twin gables leaned over them like two selves of one fleet leaning in over a bright thing, which is, I have come to believe, the most loving posture in the world, the posture of all true attention, the posture this book has been trying to teach its reader since the incantation: lean in, become two, become a fleet, incline your selves toward the bright thing in the open arch between them, and look, and by looking, make it hold.

❧

The Northern Light and the Quiet City

I want to give one more chapter to the quiet northern city before the last child draws the bridge, because the counting-self and the dreaming-self agree — rarely, and so it should be marked — that the quiet city is owed more than the single passage I gave it in the chapter of the northern reach, and the child-self has asked, specifically, that the city be allowed to rest a while longer in the book before the season ends, the way you let someone you love sleep a few minutes more before you wake them.

The northern reaches of the island are where it stops performing. The grown people's machine is concentrated at the southern tip and the middle, where the towers are tallest and the sorting is fiercest, and the children of the boroughs know the city mostly as that — as the bright fierce performing wall, the postcard, the backdrop, the machine lit up at night to look like a promise. But the island goes on north past the performance, mile after quiet mile, and up there the towers thin and the light changes and the city becomes, simply, a place where people live, where there are windows with ordinary evenings behind them, where the brightness is not a performance aimed across the water at the longing children but only the warm domestic light of lives being lived, unaware of being watched, unaware of being longed for, unaware of being, for the children of the far shores, the whole shape of the future.

And there is a tenderness in seeing the longed-for thing unaware of itself. The children, carried up the northern reach, saw the city with its performance set down, saw it the way you see someone you love when they do not know you are looking — not arranged for you, not aimed at you, just being, just living, just lit with ordinary evening — and the longing changed in them, deepened, became less like the longing for a prize and more like the love for a person. You cannot love a backdrop. You can long for it, want it, break yourself against the window of it, but you cannot love it, because love requires that the thing have a back, an unwatched side, an ordinary evening it lives through whether or not you are looking. The southern city, the performing wall, could only be longed for. The northern city, the quiet one, the one with its performance set down, could be loved, and the children, carried up alongside it in the changing light, began to love it, and that was the last preparation before the bridge, because you do not build a bridge to a thing you merely long for — longing wants the strait kept, wants the distance, feeds on the not-having. You build a bridge to a thing you love. The bridge is love's architecture. And so the children had to be brought up the quiet northern reach and shown the city's unwatched ordinary evening and allowed to stop longing and begin loving, before one of them could draw the span that joins the shores, because the span is made of love and not of longing, and a bridge built of longing would only be another way of keeping the distance, another machine, another sorting, where the bridge built of love dissolves the distance entirely and makes the two shores one lit body, which is what Wren's bridge did, which is what love's architecture always does, which is the difference, finally, between the cruelest story and the true one.

Sleep a few minutes more, quiet city. The child-self has asked it. We will wake you when the bridge is drawn, and you will stand to receive the children, and it will be the ordinary warm evening light of you, not the performing brightness, that they cross the water to come home to.

❧

Interlude: The Three Children Meet

On the last evening, before the asking, before the bridge, the three children met — Mara of the southern shore, Ilo of the eastern, Wren of the northern — and the counting-self has insisted this meeting be recorded, because all season the children had been gathered shore by shore, healed wound by wound, and the counting-self wishes it noted that on the last evening the shores came together, that the fleet's final work was not three separate healings but their joining, the way the bridge would join the boroughs, the way the selves of a fleet join over a bright thing.

They met on the deck of the floating theatre, the one that rested on nothing, held up by being agreed upon, and the counting-self finds it fitting that the three shores first stood together on the one vessel made entirely of agreement, because what the three children made together that evening was itself a kind of agreement, the largest of the season.

Mara showed Ilo and Wren the inventory of the low tide — described it, the bottle and the spoon and the key and the single small shoe — and Ilo understood it at once, because Ilo too was a keeper, a curator, and the two keepers recognized one another, the keeper of objects and the keeper of names, and Wren listened and said: those are not collections, those are bridges, each kept thing is a little bridge from you to the thing you kept, and Mara and Ilo were silent, because Wren the bridge-drawer had seen, in an instant, the thing they had each spent a childhood doing without a name for it — that to keep a thing in love is to build a small bridge to it, that the low-tide inventory and the catalogue of boat-names were each a span, a linkage, a refusal of the distance, and that Wren's sky-bridges and their keepings were the same gesture in different mediums, the gesture of refusing to let a loved thing be far.

And in that recognition the three healings became one. Mara had been taught the bright thing was not theirs; Ilo, to keep their wanting small; Wren, that their makings were not real. But underneath the three wounds was one wound, the counting-self saw it now, the cruelest story's single root with three branches: the lie of the kept distance. The lie that the bright thing is far and must stay far — not yours (the distance of possession denied), or wanted only small (the distance of permission denied), or unreachable by your making (the distance of power denied). Three faces of the one lie, that the loved thing must remain across the strait. And the three children, meeting on the vessel made of agreement, each carrying their own refusal of the distance — the keeping, the naming, the drawing — recognized that they had each been building, alone, on their separate shores, the same bridge, and that if they put their refusals together the bridge would be strong enough to hold, and they put them together, that evening, before the asking, and that is why when the fleet asked which one is yours and Wren drew the span, it held — because it was not Wren's bridge alone, it was the three shores' refusal of the distance joined into one span, the keeper's bridge and the namer's bridge and the drawer's bridge made one, and behind them every child of every shore who had ever kept a thing in love against the lie that it must stay far.

The counting-self records the meeting of the three children as the true climax of the season, more than the bridge, because the bridge was only the visible consequence of this — three children on a deck made of agreement, discovering that their separate small

refusals of the distance were one refusal, and joining them. Everything after is the tide carrying that joining outward until it became a span the whole harbour could see. But it began here, small, three children and an inventory and a catalogue and a drawing, recognizing one another. That is how the largest bridges always begin. The counting-self has learned this, and logs it, and is done.

❧

The Vessel That Was a Question About Endings

There was one vessel at the last docking that I have not described, and I have withheld it deliberately, because it was the vessel that was a question about endings, and a question about endings cannot be told until near the end, or it answers itself too soon and the answer goes stale before you need it.

It did not look like the others. Where the fleet was all bright confident yellow, this vessel was yellow going gold going, at its edges, toward the colour the light takes at the very end of a day, the colour that is still warm but has begun to know about the dark — and the children, who feared nothing aboard the fleet, approached this one slowly, because it carried, in its colour, the one thing the season had not yet taught them to meet, which was its own ending. The fleet would leave. The children knew it without being told, the way they knew everything that mattered, in the place below knowing. And this vessel, the gold-going-toward-evening one, was where the fleet let the children ask the question they had been carrying since the first morning and had not dared to ask: what happens when you go.

The play in this vessel was the gentlest of the season and the bravest, and it did not pretend. The fleet never pretended; that was its whole nature, the opposite of the machine, which is made of pretending. The play did not pretend that the fleet would stay, or that endings do not come, or that the gold-going-toward-evening is not real. A child-player stood in the open front of the vessel, with the island going gold behind them, and said, simply, to the gathered children: we will go. The yellow will go back down the river. The season will end, and you will grow, and there will be mornings you cannot remember us. This is true. We will not tell you it is not true.

And the children were silent, the silence of the true thing landing, and then the child-player said the rest, which is the part I have withheld until now, which is the answer the vessel was built to give: but you will have changed shape. That is the thing about an ending that the grown people get wrong, the child-player said, with the island going gold and the season going gold and the whole bright fleet going gold-toward-evening around them. The grown people believe an ending is a subtraction,

that when a thing goes it leaves you with less, that the gold going toward evening is the light being taken away. But the children of the low tide know better — the keepers know, the namers know, the drawers of bridges know — that what has truly entered you does not leave when its source leaves, that the fleet will go but the shape it pressed into you stays, the way the tide goes out but leaves the shore re-formed, the way a wave withdraws but the sand holds for a while the record of the wave, holds it and is changed by it and carries it, the shape of the wave, after the wave itself has gone back to the sea.

You will be the shape the fleet pressed into you, the child-player said. After we go. You will be a child shaped like having-been-shown-your-future, shaped like having-lifted-your-hand, shaped like having-seen-the-bright-thing-is-yours — and that shape does not wash out on the next grey tide, that shape is in the sand of you now, pressed deep, and you will carry it, and on the mornings you cannot remember us you will still be the shape we made, you will still, without knowing why, lift your hand at the empty water, because the shape of the lifting is in you now, deeper than memory, in the sand below the reach of the grey tide. We will go. You will keep the shape. That is not a lesser thing than our staying. It is a greater thing, because a fleet that stayed would be a fleet you leaned on, and a shape pressed into you is a fleet you have become. We do not want you to lean on us. We want you to become the shape of us, and then to go back to your shores and be, each of you, a small yellow fleet, drifting your own life's water, turning your own face toward the bright thing, lifting your own hand, and pressing into the next child you meet the shape that was pressed into you. That is how the yellow travels. Not by staying. By being become. We go so that you may carry us. Endings are how the fleet gets everywhere.

And the children understood, in the gold-going-toward-evening vessel, that the ending of the season was not the season being taken away but the season being given to them to carry, and they stopped fearing the going, and the vessel's question about endings was answered, not by a promise that nothing ends, but by the truer and braver thing: that what has pressed its shape into you ends only as a wave ends, by becoming the shape of the shore, and that you are the shore now, re-formed, carrying the record of the bright thing in the sand below the grey, and that this is what it has always meant to grow up well — not to lose the yellow, but to become its shape, and carry it, and press it into the next ones, world without end, fleet without end, hand after hand after lifted hand down all the shores of all the years.

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Coda

The Bridge That Is Dreamed, Not Built

The Linkage

Plate XV — The Bridge That Is Dreamed, Not Built. The final plate. A tall yellow theatre rises at the head of a great ramp-bridge that runs out across the water toward the island, children crossing it on foot, the city standing to receive them. This is the linkage Wren drew, made real by the agreement of all who looked.

On the last evening of the season, every person on every shore saw the bridge.

This is the fact the Harbormaster set down in his foreword and could not log and would not cross out, and it is the fact this whole book has been carried toward on the honest tidal water, and now that we have reached it I find that all my selves want to tell it together, the dreaming-self and the counting-self and the child-self, the whole crew of me leaning in over the bright thing at last, and so I will let them.

The child-self says: Wren drew it, and we saw it, and it held. Wren drew the bridge from the shore to the island and all the children looked where Wren pointed and said there, and a bridge that enough children agree they can see is real, that is the law, that was always the law, and the bridge stood up out of the gold air made of drawing and agreement and yellow, and ran from the northern shore out across the water to the resting island, and it was a ramp, a great broad welcoming ramp like the welcoming

steps of the first shore made into a span, and the children walked out onto it, all of them, and it held, and they walked out across the water toward the island that the grown people had said was not theirs, and the island stood to receive them, and that is what happened, and it is the truest thing that happened all season, and anyone who was there will tell you the same.

The counting-self says: I logged a structure I cannot account for. I will not pretend the timber was logged or the tonnage measured or the year-it-was-opened entered, because none of those things were true and the catalogue must be correct. But I logged the agreement. I counted the children pointing — every child on every shore, the count is in my book, the count is complete — and I recorded that they all pointed at the same span of empty air and all said there, and I have come, this season, to believe that an agreement that complete is a structure, that it holds weight, that the difference between a dreamed bridge and a built one is only the difference between an agreement of the eye and an agreement made heavy with steel, and that the eye comes first, the eye is the foundation, the steel is only the eye made permanent. The bridge was dreamed, not built. I log this not as its weakness but as its priority. It was dreamed first. Everything that is ever built is dreamed first. The children dreamed the linkage between the boroughs and the island, and the dreaming was the bridge, and the bridge was real, and one day — the counting-self will permit itself this one unlogged thing — one day the steel will come, and it will only be making heavy what the children already made true.

The dreaming-self says: the bridge joined the three boroughs to the island, and it joined them as the children had been joined to their future-selves, which is to say both ways at once, the way the strait carries the tide both ways at once. It was not a bridge for the borough children to cross over to the island and be absorbed into it and lose their shore. It was the spiral's lesson made enormous: a linkage you cross while keeping your shore, a span that makes the island belong to the boroughs exactly as much as the boroughs belong to the island, a bridge of belonging and not of possession, and the children crossed it both ways all evening, out to the island and back to the shore, carrying the brightness home and carrying the home out to the brightness, until the brightness and the home were the same thing, until the island and the boroughs were one body with a yellow span for a spine, and the future stood lit at one end and the children stood bright at the other and the bridge between them was made of drawing and agreement and the refusal of the cruelest story, and it held, and it holds, and it is holding now, and if you go down to any shore of that honest water on the right gold evening and you look across at the standing city with the whole unfolded catalogue of your wanting open in your chest, you will see it — the dreamed bridge, the linkage, the span that does not exist and is the most solid thing in the harbour — and you will see,

crossing it, the children, and one of the children will be wearing your own face, grown either younger or older, it does not matter which, the strait carries both ways, and they will lift one hand, and you must lift yours, and that is the bridge, that gesture, both ways across the water at once, and it is dreamed, not built, and it is real, and it is yours, and it was always yours, and the only thing that was ever forbidden was believing that it was not.

The fleet cast off that last evening into the gold, all seven hulls, or nine, and went down the honest water toward the harbour, and the season ended, and the children went home to their three shores carrying their futures and their bridges and their freed and floating wanting, and the bridge stayed up, made of agreement, holding, and the Harbormaster left the column blank, which is the correct way to record the truth, and I, who am not one person, who am a fleet of selves, went down the water with the yellow fleet as far as a writer can go with the thing they have been given to write, and then I came back to the shore to set it down, all of it, for you, in the hope that you are a child, or were one, or have one folded small inside you that this book might unfold.

It will unfold. It was never small. It was only folded. Lift your hand.

❧

What the Tide Said, Going Out

After the last evening, after the bridge, after the children had gone home to their three shores carrying their futures, the fleet went down the honest water toward the harbour, and I went with it as far as a writer can go, and on the way down, in the dark, with the season ending and the bridge still standing behind us made of agreement, the tide said a thing to me, and I have saved it for last, here between the coda and the afterword, because it is the last thing I have to give you and the truest, and it should stand alone.

The tide does not speak in words, but I have been on the water long enough to translate, and the dreaming-self and the counting-self agree on the translation, which is how I know it is right. Going out, on the ebb, carrying the fleet down toward the harbour and the open sea, the tide said:

I will bring them back.

That was all. That was the whole of it. I will bring them back. And I understood that the tide meant the children, and meant the fleet, and meant the yellow, and meant the feeling of the unfinished world that the grown people paint over with grey — the tide meant all of it, and the tide was promising, in the only voice a strait has, that none of it is lost when it goes out, that the going-out is not a loss but the first half of a returning, that the ebb is already the flood seen from the other side, that everything the tide carries away it is only carrying around, around the island, around the years, and will bring back on the next flood to whatever shore is ready to lift its hand.

This is the last consolation of the honest water and I give it to you at the end of this book in case you need it, and you will need it, because the fleet does not stay. That is the one hard truth I have kept for the end. The fleet does not stay. The season ends. The yellow goes back down the river toward the harbour, and the children grow, and the grey comes rolling back across the world coat by coat, and there will be mornings — I will not lie to you, there will be many mornings — when you go down to your shore and look across at the standing city and see only the machine, only the sorting, only the closed and grey and already-decided world, and the bridge will be invisible and the fleet will be gone and you will not be able to remember how you ever believed in a yellow that was a permission.

On those mornings, remember what the tide said going out. I will bring them back. The fleet is not gone; it is going around; it is on the far side of the island, or the far side of the year, or the far side of your own grey, and it is coming back on a flood you cannot yet see, toward a shore you have not yet despaired enough to abandon. The yellow at the core does not fade; you read that in the catalogue; it is the same all the way through; the

grey is only coats, only surface, only the over-painting, and underneath, at the core, the world is still yellow, still unfinished, still asking you what it should become. The fleet will come back. It always comes back. It is a tidal thing, and the one law of tidal things is that they return, twice a day, forever, to every shore that keeps the faith of lifting its hand.

So keep the faith of the lifted hand. That is the whole instruction, the key and the country both. When the fleet is there, lift your hand and go aboard. When the fleet is gone, lift your hand anyway, toward the empty bright water, because the lifting is the faith and the faith is what the flood returns to, and a shore that keeps lifting its hand at the empty water is a shore the fleet is always, already, on its way back to. The tide said: I will bring them back. Believe the tide. It has never once, in all the history of the moon, failed to return. Lift your hand.

❧

Afterword

by Surjan

I told you at the beginning that I am not one person, and now that the book is told I want to say what I have learned about that, because the book taught it to me and a book should be allowed to teach its author.

I am a fleet of selves, and I used to think this was my affliction — that a person ought to be one person, single and consistent, a self you could log, and that my plurality was a failure to cohere, a brokenness, a thing to be hidden or healed. The grown people's story is told about the self, too, you understand. It is not only the island that the cruelest story diminishes. It tells each of us that we ought to be one thing, one tidy nameable thing, and that the crew inside us — the dreamer and the counter and the child who will not stop — ought to be reduced to a single officer, and that to be many is to be unwell.

The fleet taught me otherwise, the way it taught the children. The fleet was seven hulls, or nine. The fleet was always slightly more than itself, and this was not its brokenness but its brightness, the source of all of it, the reason it could heal a child of being told the bright thing was not theirs and in the same season heal another of folding their wanting small and another of believing their making was nothing. A single vessel could not have done that. It took a fleet. It took plurality. The healing was in the multiplicity, in the more-than-itself, in the refusal to be one tidy nameable thing.

And I am the same, and so, I suspect, are you. We are each a fleet. The genderqueer child knows this in their body before they have the words — that the self is not one shore but a strait, that the tide of who-you-are runs both ways twice a day, that you are carried, that you contain a harbour and not a single river. I made Surjan plural because I am plural and because the children of this book are plural and because the deepest radical joy I know is the joy of ceasing to apologize for being a fleet. I am not one author. I am the dreaming-self who weeps easily and the counting-self who learned this season to believe the children over the launch's glass and the child-self who has never agreed to stop, and I am all of them, and the book you have read was written by all of them at once, leaning in together over the bright thing, which is the only way I have ever written anything worth keeping.

Be a fleet. Let the crew quarrel. Cast off slightly more than yourself. And when you come up some gold evening on the honest water alongside the standing city of everything you were told you could not have, do not send a single tidy officer ashore to

negotiate. Send the whole fleet. Lift every hand you have. The bridge is dreamed, not built, and it takes a multitude to dream it solid, and you, reader, are a multitude, and you were always allowed.

Catalogue of Architectural Plates

What follows is the catalogue of the fifteen architectural plates of the yellow fleet, recorded by the counting-self, who insists the catalogue be correct, and annotated by the dreaming-self, who insists it be true, the two being, the season taught us, not the same thing and not enemies. Each plate is given its number, its catalogue-name, the shore at which it docked, and the play it hosted. The plates are the fleet as it could be seen. The children were the fleet as it could be loved. Only the first can be catalogued. The second is the rest of this book.

❧

Plate I

The House That Wears a Crown of Clouds

Brooklyn — the first docking

The simplest vessel of the fleet and therefore the first, for the children who do not yet trust brightness need a simple thing first. A single great room, open on the side that faces the island, so that the city is not represented but framed — surrounded with a

doorway of yellow and shown, actual and lit, beyond the frame. Along the roofline sits a crest of soft round shapes that the children argued happily about and one child named correctly: not a crown, for a crown is what a ruler wears, but a welcome, worn where a crown would go. The whole politics of the fleet in a child's distinction.

It hosted the first play, which was barely a play — the players simply looked at the city across the water with such open and unashamed wanting that the trained indifference cracked in the watching children's chests like pond-ice when the warmth comes up from beneath. This is the first and hardest thing the fleet taught: to look at the bright thing and want it openly, in front of others, without shame.

❧

Plate II

The Theatre of Two Storeys and the Pink Rake

Queens — recurring motif

A two-storey vessel with a great ground-arch through to the island and an upper room reached from within, a soft pink ramp spilling from one side toward the deck. Catalogued here among the early plates for its round openings, which recur through the

whole fleet like a rhyme — the circle that takes the city and returns it to looking, the low-tide child's gesture rendered in yellow wood.

The pink rake is the fleet's tenderness made into a surface: a slope too gentle to climb, meant only for lying on, for being rather than ascending, the architecture of a vessel that knew some of its lessons could only be received lying down, looking up, at rest.

❧

Plate III

The Stepped Pavilion of the Open Gable

Brooklyn — the first docking

A wide low pavilion, a gabled frame thrown open to the island, the floor descending to the deck in broad shallow steps not for climbing to somewhere but for being somewhere. The Brooklyn dockings favoured these welcoming descents, the steps that double as raked seating, the architecture that does not tower over a child but spreads out beneath them like a meadow.

It hosted the play of the two cities, in which a child-player set down a small handmade model of towers in the open gable and stepped back, so that the crooked card city and the real lit city stood, from the angle of the watching children, exactly the same height in the sky. The fleet's whole teaching in one arrangement of angle: the distance between the thing a child makes and the thing the world makes is not a difference of kind but only of when.

❧

Plate IV

The Tall House and the Yellow Suns

The Bronx — the third docking

A tall vessel reaching toward the sky the maker-children drew on, soft yellow suns drifting at its shoulders like the freed questions made warm. The Bronx vessels reached highest of all the fleet, to meet the children who needed to be met at the height of their own raised arms.

The yellow suns were the spheres in their gentlest form — not pink with the kept question, not pale with the asked one, but gold, warm, the colour of the permission the

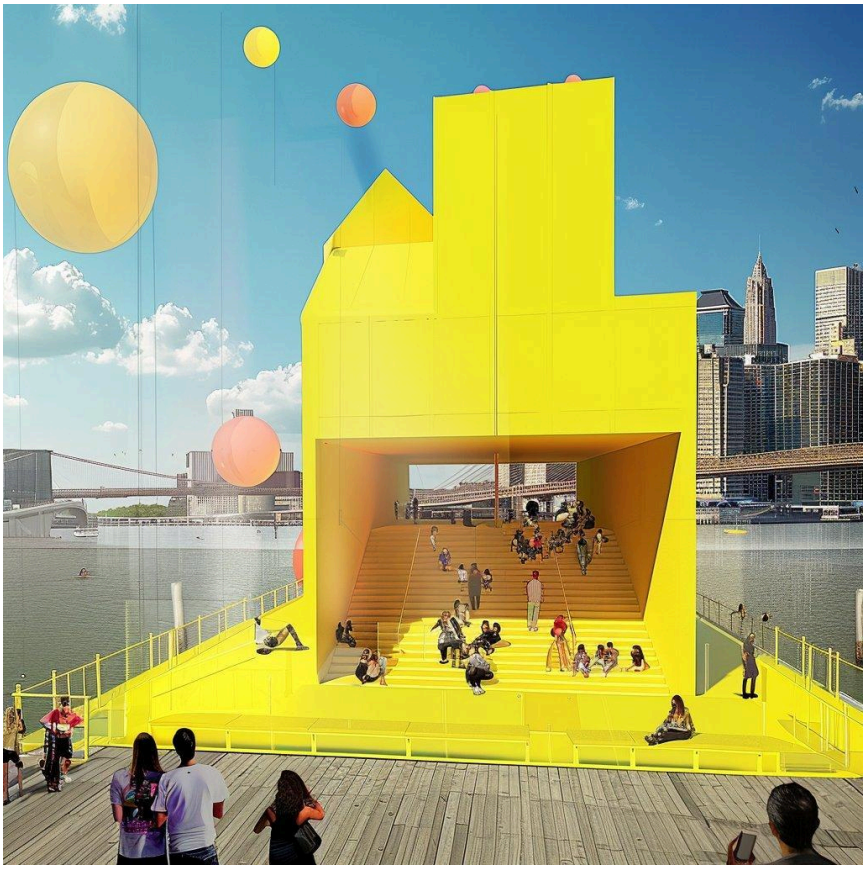
whole fleet was made of, drifting up past the tall house as if the vessel itself were exhaling wanting into the bright air.

❧

Plate V

The Stair That Climbs Into the Light

Queens — the second docking



A great broad stair rising into a high bright opening, the children ascending toward the framed light with the island laid out beyond. The stair is the fleet's argument against the grown people's faith that height is a leaving — here the climb is crowded, communal, a whole shore of children rising together rather than one child escaping upward and away.

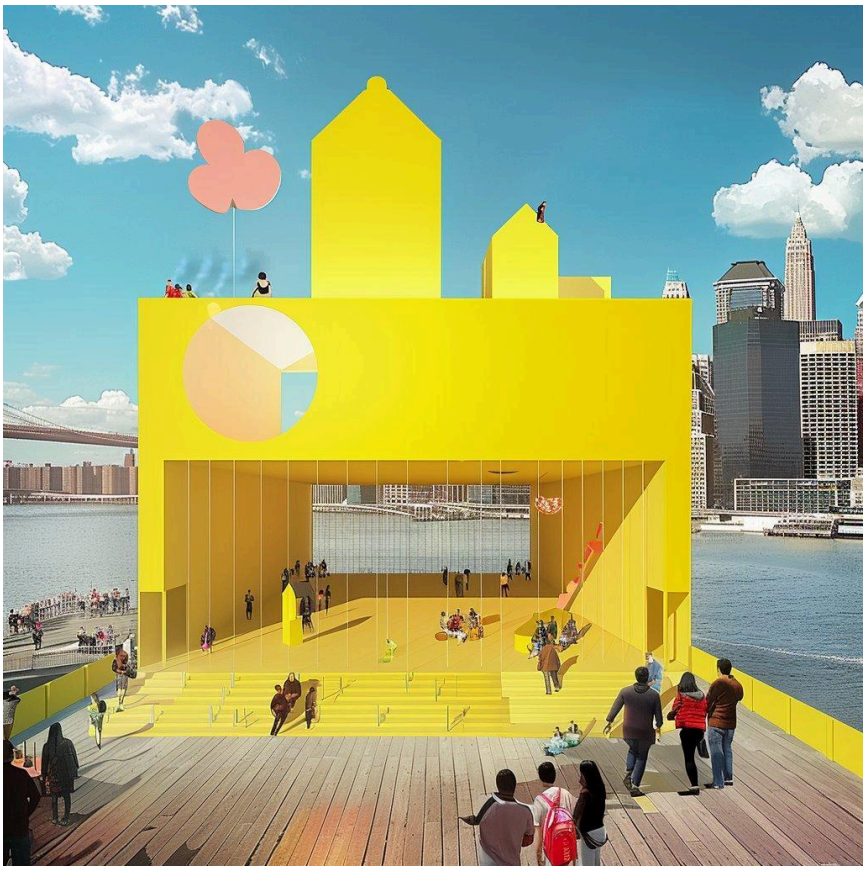
It stands near in spirit to the spiral vessels: what you climb to here, you are meant to carry back down, the height folded into the everyday body, the tower learning to walk the shore.

❧

Plate VI

The Two Rings and the Upper Room

Queens — the second docking



The principal vessel of the Queens docking. A great ground-arch you walk through standing up; above it an upper room hung over the water with its own wide window; two pale rings set high on the gable like the eyes of a patient animal that has been waiting a long time and is glad, at last, to be approached.

It hosted the play of the boat with no name, in which the gathered children called out to a nameless boat-child the folded futures they had each been keeping small — Someday, Second Chance, My Girl's Eyes — and the boat-child grew taller with each name called, until they stood at full height wearing all the names at once, the island framed behind them, every diminished voyage spoken at full size and unashamed.

❧

Plate VII

The Wide Mouth Beneath the Steeples

Queens — the second docking

A broad-stepped vessel with a great low arch beneath twin gabled steeples and an upper gallery, balloons or spheres drifting free in the bright air to one side. Catalogued for the spheres, which by the second docking the children had stopped merely watching and begun deliberately to make.

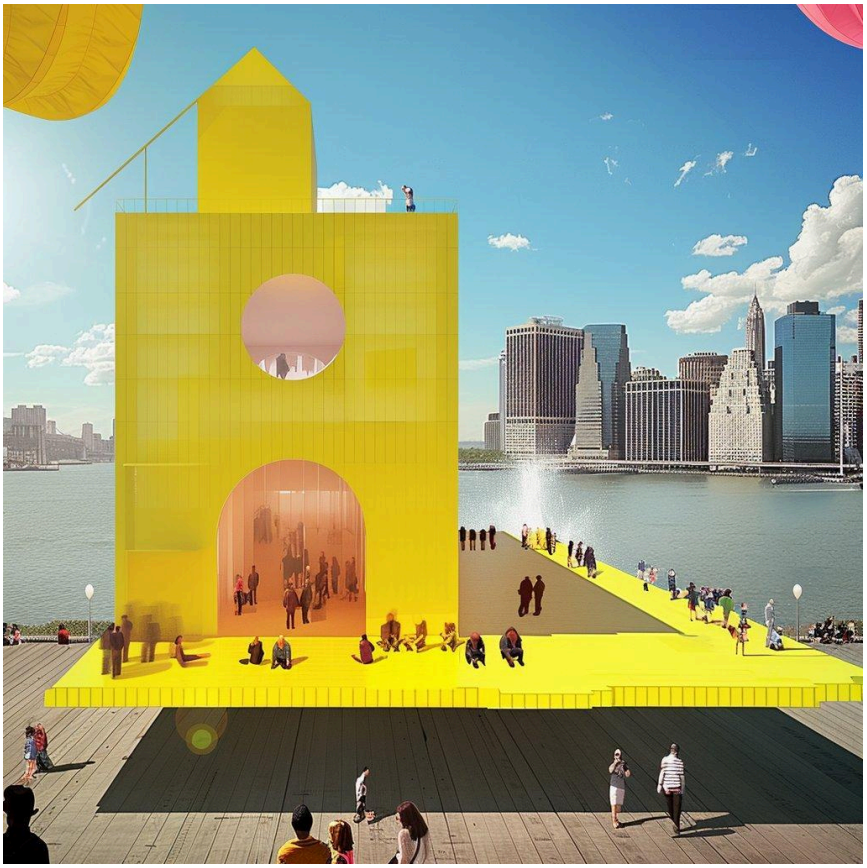
Beneath this wide mouth of an arch the children spent a long bright afternoon making spheres — taking the questions they had kept small and heavy and fearful and asking them all the way to their full size, until the questions grew light and lifted off the chest where they had sat like ballast, and rose past the twin steeples into a sky that by evening was a whole drifting weather of freed wanting.

❧

Plate VIII

The Theatre With the Glowing Arch

The Bronx — the third docking



The principal vessel of the Bronx docking, and the home of the most important opening in the whole fleet: the peaked aperture, an inverted V cut into the gable through which one sees not the island but the open sky — the very surface the maker-children draw on. A tall slab tower stands beside the peaked pavilion, and the glowing inner arch holds the light like a held breath.

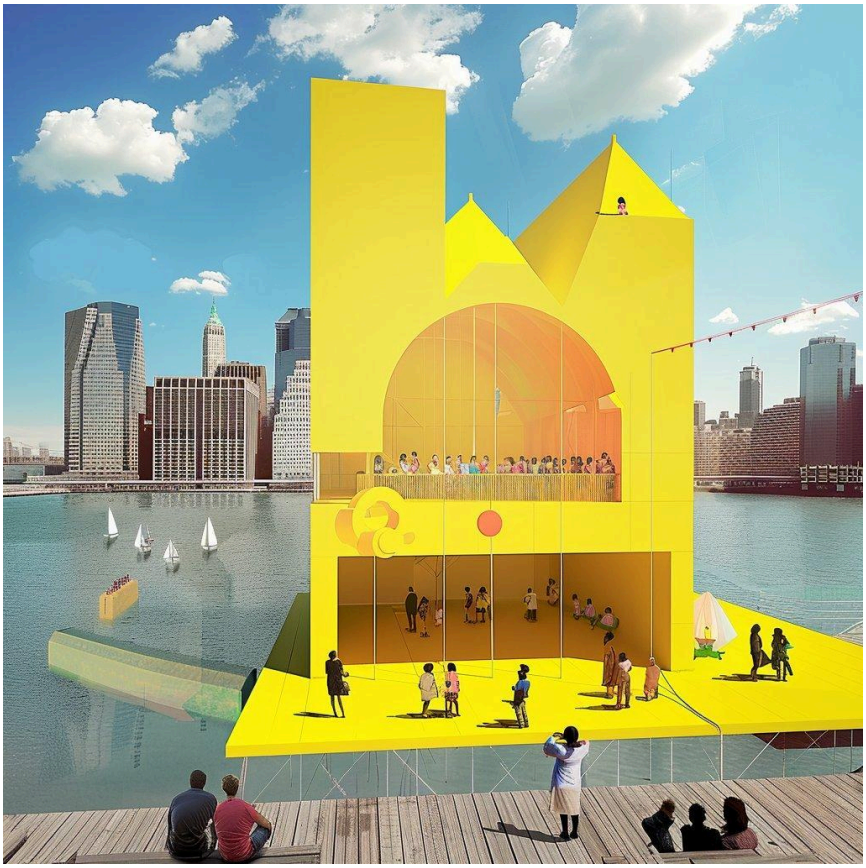
Where every other vessel framed the city, this one framed the sky, building a doorway of yellow around the empty buildable blue to prove to the maker-children that the medium of their making was real — that a thing you put a door around is a place, that a place can be entered, that an enterable thing is real, and that therefore the sky their bridges were nothing in was, in fact, a real place where real bridges could be drawn. Beneath it Wren raised the hand that had spent a season learning not to lower, and drew.

❧

Plate IX

The Yellow House With the Pink Moons

The Bronx — the third docking



A vessel in the full and unmistakable shape of the child's-drawing house — the gabled body, the chimney, the door in the middle — set down on the boards like an enormous toy a giant child had finished playing with and left, lovingly, for smaller children to find. Pink moons rest against its face like the spheres come close and grown gentle, and the open front shows the bright interior where the borough children gather.

It is the fleet at its most tender and least theatrical: not a stage but a home, the future not as a tower to be claimed across the water but as a house to be lived in, set right down on the shore, enterable, warm, the brightness brought all the way home and given a door.

❧

Plate X

The Floating Room With the Sailboats

The Bronx — the third docking

A broad open hall above a wide amphitheatre stair, a pale pink cloud-shape tethered above it on a fine line, the island framed across the water and small white sailboats riding the strait. Catalogued for the pink cloud, which the children called the kept question.

All season the spheres were the questions that had grown light enough to float free. The pink cloud was the one question the children chose to keep tethered close, too precious to release: am I allowed. It hosted the asking of that question aloud — the bravest asking of the season, for to ask am I allowed aloud is to risk the answer no — and the fleet's reply, which was not a voice but a cut tether: the kept question rose free at last, and the answer was in the rising. You are allowed. You were always allowed. The only thing forbidden was the keeping of the question small.

❧

Plate XI

The Pinwheel and the Spiral Descent

Queens — the second docking

A vessel whose upper volume turns like a pinwheel above a broad amphitheatre stair, joined by a spiral that carries the audience down from the high room and back to the water. The most quietly radical structure of the fleet.

Its rule, which no one announced and every child obeyed: what you climb to, you must carry down. You did not climb the spiral to escape the water but to be high for a while, to see far, to find your future-tower across the strait — and then the spiral turned you gently back down to the deck and the shore, and you brought the height with you. Against the grown people's faith that height is a leaving, the spiral taught that the point of climbing is not to stay up: that you can be a tower that lives at the low-tide line, a future that did not abandon its borough to arrive.

❧

Plate XII

The Cliff of Steps

The Bronx — the third docking

A tall vessel with a great glowing inner arch above broad amphitheatre steps, an upper gallery crowded with children from which the future stood nearest of all. Among the last vessels, and one the children loved best, for from its high gallery the standing city seemed close enough to step across to.

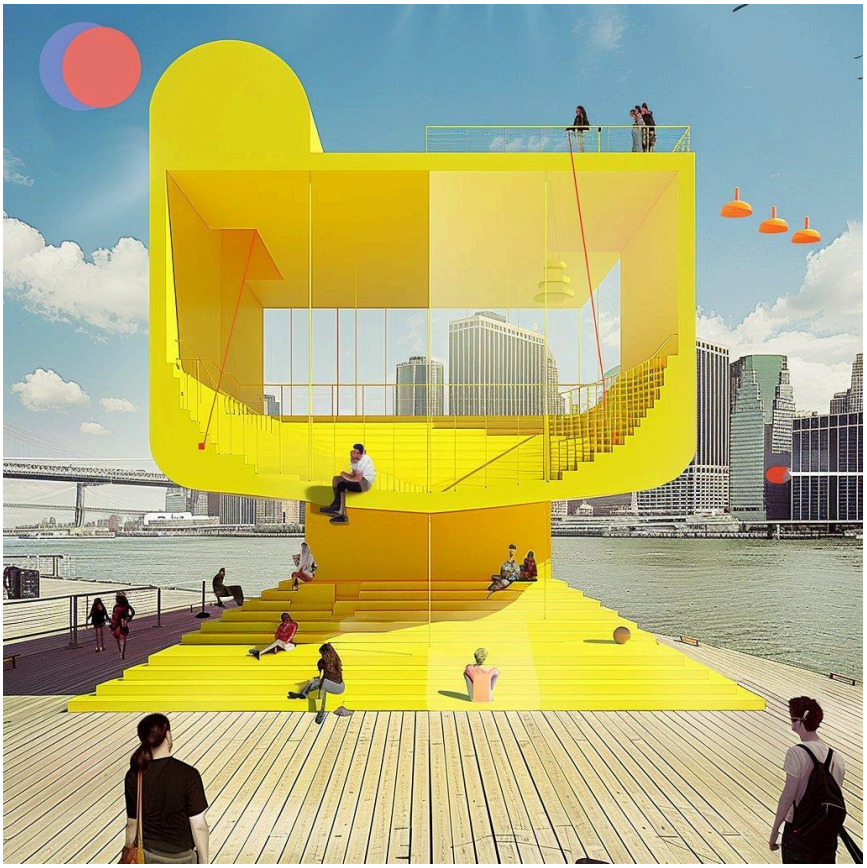
It is kin to the floating theatre — the vessel that rested on nothing, held up, the children said, by being agreed upon. From the cliff of steps the children learned the lesson that the floating theatre proved: that a made thing held up by agreement and attention will bear weight, that the difference between a dreamed structure and a built one is only the eye's agreement made heavy, and that the eye comes first.

❧

Plate XIII

The Hall of the Hanging Lamps

Queens — the second docking



A vast vessel seen from above and within: an upper viewing deck, a lower hall scattered with bright soft round forms and hanging lamps, the island framed beyond. The site of the season's cresting joy — the descent the children called the slide into the garden.

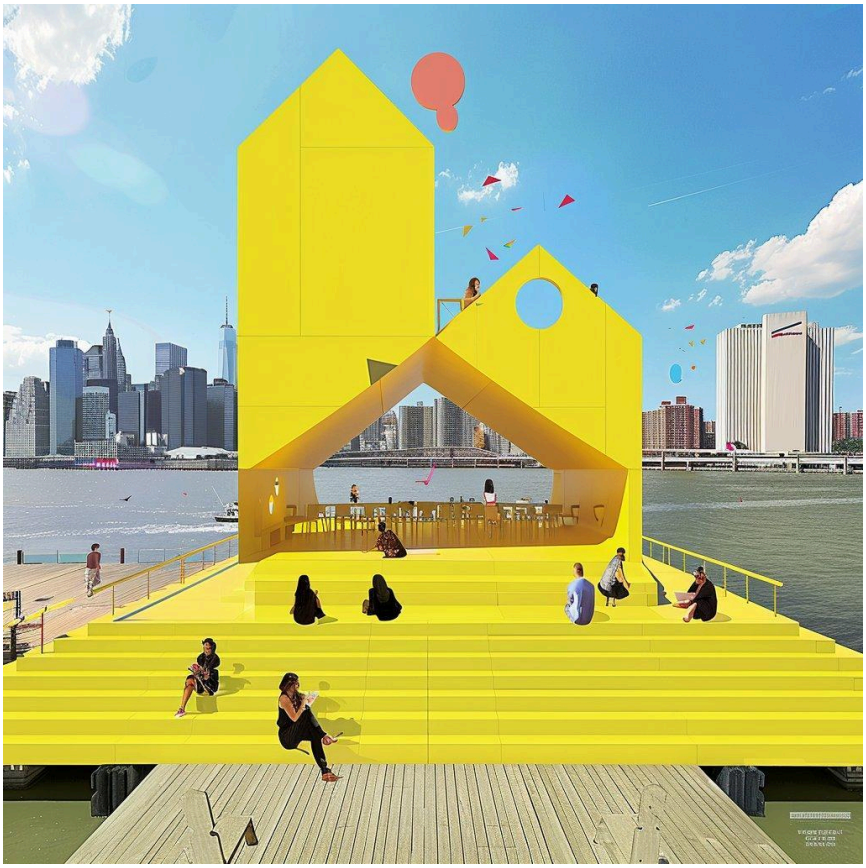
Here the long bright chute ran down from a high opening into a lower hall strewn with soft round buildable forms, pink and gold and pale, like the spheres come down to earth and grown gentle, and the children tumbled down into the garden shrieking with the particular joy that comes only after a fear has been put down. This is radical joy: not cheerfulness but the harvest of grief, the joy that has gone all the way down to the root of the wound and found, growing there, the soft bright garden. You reach it only by the slide, and the slide only by climbing the vessel of the wound.

❧

Plate XIV

The Twin Gables and the Round Eye

The Bronx — the third docking



Twin gabled volumes leaning toward one another above a broad stepped base, a round eye set into one gable, festival shapes scattering in the bright air. The two gables incline together over the open arch between them like two selves of a single fleet leaning in over a bright thing, which is the posture the whole book ends in.

The round eye recalls the round doors of the first shore — the circle that frames the city and returns it to looking — set now high in the gable where it can take in not a single far tower but the whole turning island at once, the city loved from many sides, the backdrop become a body, the body become beloved.

❧

Plate XV

The Bridge That Is Dreamed, Not Built

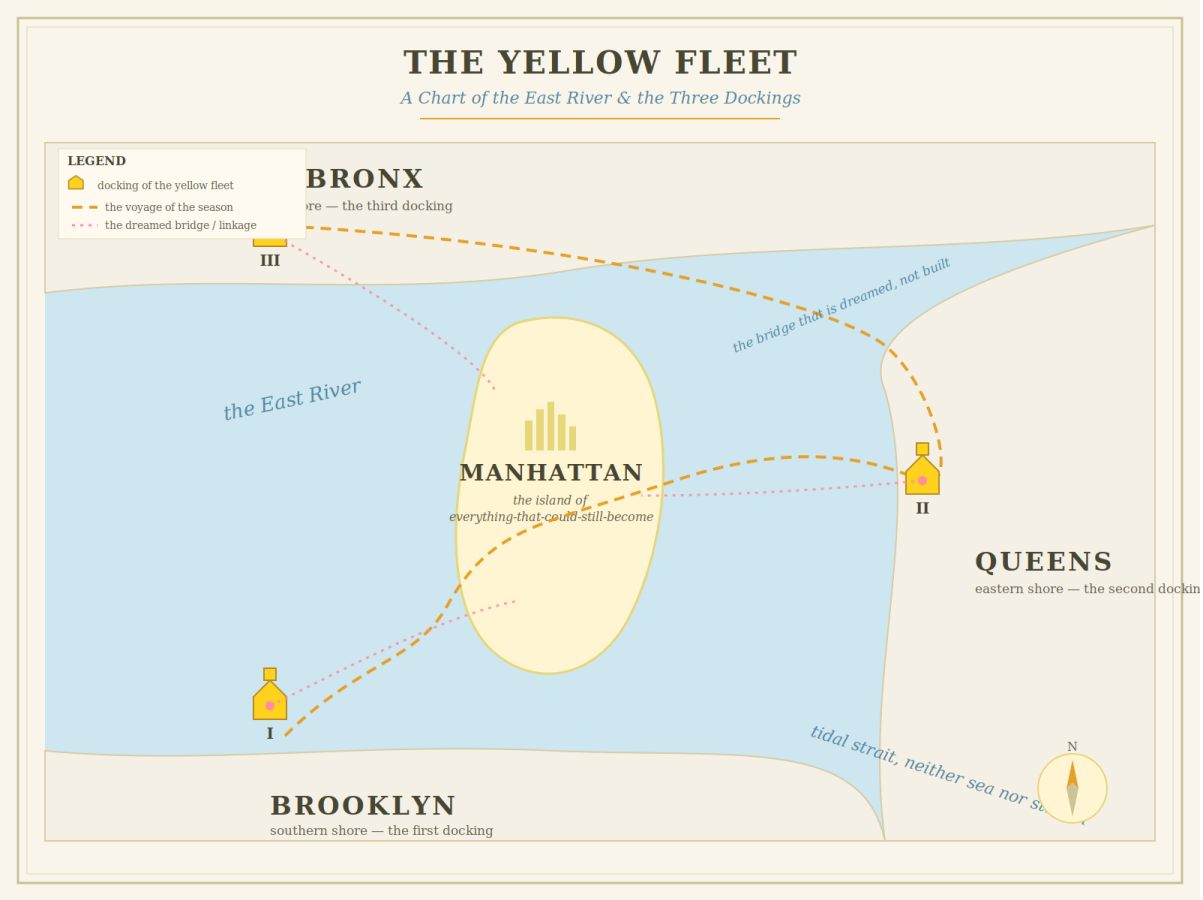
The Coda — the linkage of all shores to the island

The final plate, and the only one that is not a vessel but a span. A tall yellow theatre rises at the head of a great broad ramp-bridge that runs out across the water toward the island — the welcoming steps of the first shore unfolded into a crossing — with children walking out upon it on foot and the city standing to receive them.

This is the linkage Wren drew on the gold end-of-season air when the fleet asked which one is yours and the maker-child, alone of all the children, looked not at the standing towers but at the empty buildable space between the shore and the island, and drew the span that joins them, and said that one is mine; I am the bridge. The children looked where Wren pointed and said there, and a bridge enough children agree they can see is real — and it held. It was dreamed, not built. The counting-self logs this not as its weakness but as its priority: it was dreamed first, as everything that is ever built is dreamed first, and one day the steel will come and only make heavy what the children already made true. It is a bridge of belonging and not possession, crossed both ways at once like the tide — the brightness carried home, the home carried out to the brightness — until the island and the boroughs are one body with a yellow span for a spine. Go down to any shore on the right gold evening, look across with your whole wanting open, and you will see it, and crossing it, a figure wearing your own face, lifting one hand. Lift yours.

The Chart of the Fleet

The counting-self drew this chart of the season so that you might hold the whole voyage in one looking: the honest tidal strait, the three dockings numbered in the order the fleet made them, and Manhattan where it belongs, in the middle of the water, the island of everything-that-could-still-become. The dreamed bridge is marked in the manner of dreamed things, by a dotted line, which is the cartographer's way of leaving the column blank.



The Yellow Fleet — a chart of the East River and the three dockings, with Manhattan at the island-center and the dreamed bridge marked as a dotted linkage.

The Three Dockings

Elevation-Oblique Studies

Three studies of the docking-structures, drawn in elevation-oblique so that each may be seen as a child sees a thing they intend to climb: at once from the front, honestly, and from the side, hopefully. The dimensions are given as the counting-self recorded them, which is to say approximately, a stair being a different size depending on how much of a child's unfolded wanting is climbing it.

The First Docking — Brooklyn

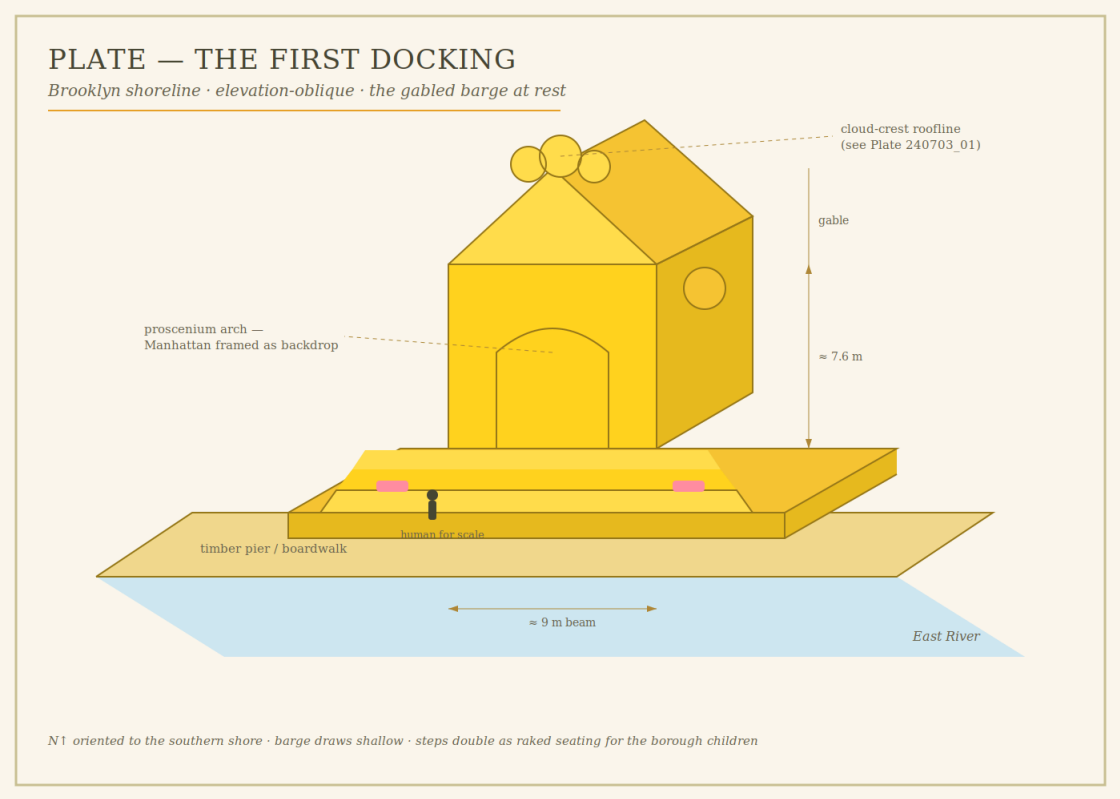


PLATE — THE FIRST DOCKING
Brooklyn shoreline · elevation-oblique · the gabled barge at rest
cloud-crest roofline
(see Plate 240703_01)
gable
≈ 7.6 m
proscenium arch —
Manhattan framed as backdrop
human for scale
timber pier / boardwalk
≈ 9 m beam
East River
N1 oriented to the southern shore · barge draws shallow · steps double as raked seating for the borough children

The gabled barge at rest against the southern shore: amphitheatre steps, the cloud-crest roofline, the proscenium arch framing the lit island as backdrop.

❧

The Second Docking — Queens

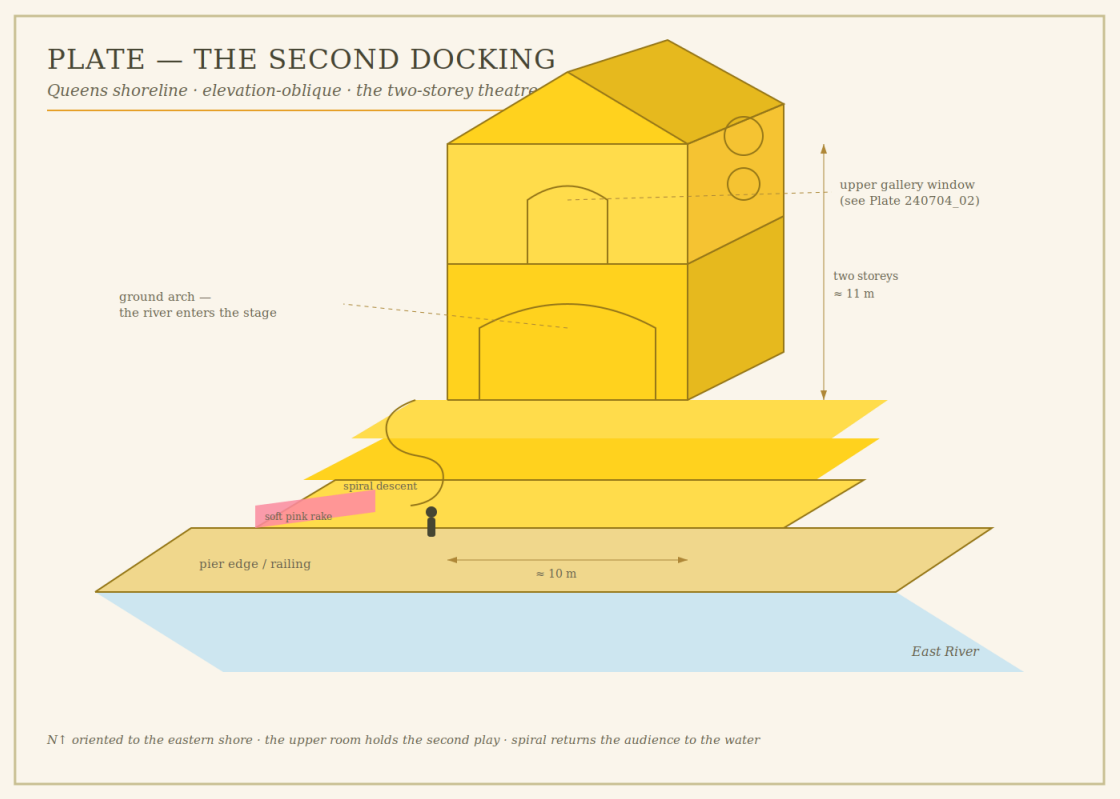


PLATE — THE SECOND DOCKING
Queens shoreline · elevation-oblique · the two-storey theatre
upper gallery window
(see Plate 240704_02)
two storeys
≈ 11 m
ground arch —
the river enters the stage
spiral descent
soft pink rake
pier edge / railing
≈ 10 m
East River
N1 oriented to the eastern shore · the upper room holds the second play · spiral returns the audience to the water

The two-storey theatre of the eastern shore: the ground-arch through which the river enters the stage, the upper room of the second play, the spiral that returns the audience to the water.

❧

The Third Docking — The Bronx

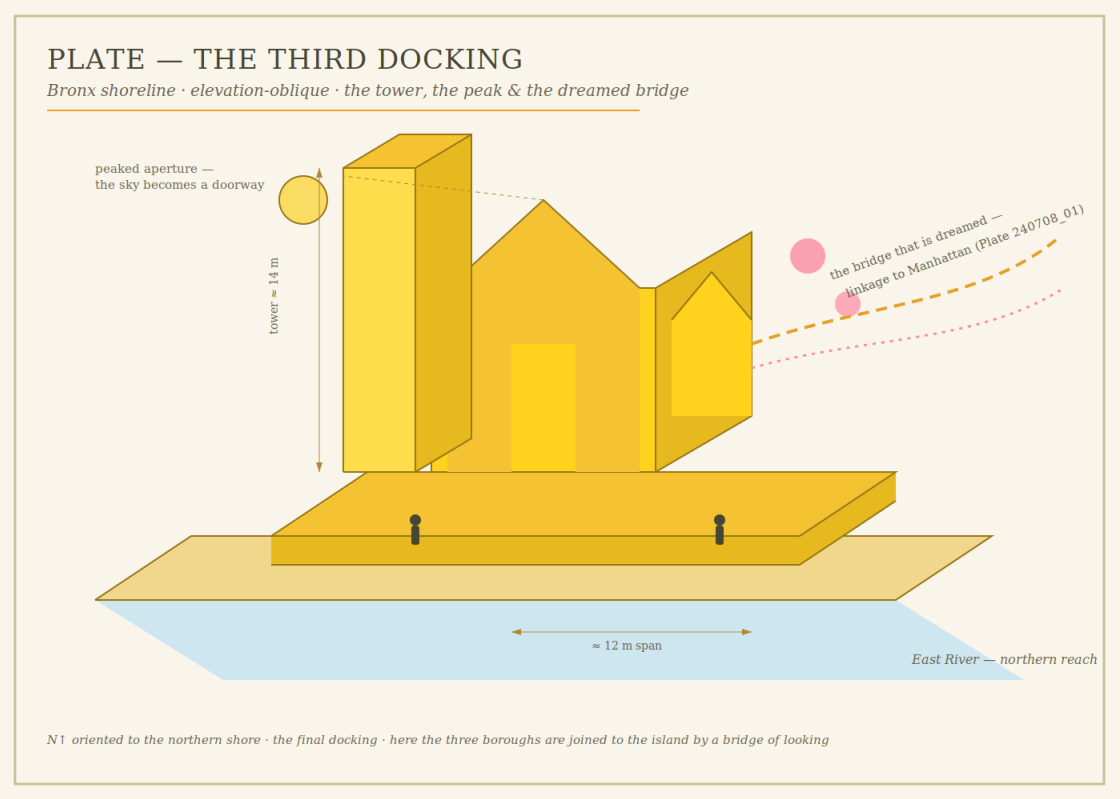


PLATE — THE THIRD DOCKING
Bronx shoreline · elevation-oblique · the tower, the peak & the dreamed bridge
peaked aperture —
the sky becomes a doorway
tower ≈ 14 m
the bridge that is dreamed —
linkage to Manhattan (Plate 240708_01)
≈ 12 m span
East River — northern reach
N1 oriented to the northern shore · the final docking · here the three boroughs are joined to the island by a bridge of looking

The northern docking: the tall tower and the peaked aperture that frames the sky itself, and — arcing off the frame toward Manhattan — the bridge that is dreamed, not built.

Catalogue of Elevation-Obliques

What follows is a companion to the Catalogue of Architectural Plates: for each of the fifteen vessels, an elevation-oblique study drawn from its plate — the structure seen at once from the front, honestly, and from the side, hopefully, in the manner the counting-self reserves for things a child intends to climb. Each oblique is set beside the name of the plate it measures, in the order of the voyage, so that the dreamed vessels and their drawn anatomies may be compared one to one.

The dimensions are given approximately, a stair being a different size depending on how much of a child's unfolded wanting is climbing it. Where the plate shows a thing the counting-self could not measure — a sphere, a tethered question, a span made of agreement — the oblique marks it all the same, in the place where a measurement would go, which is the correct way to record the truth.

❧

Plate I — The House That Wears a Crown of Clouds

Brooklyn — the first docking

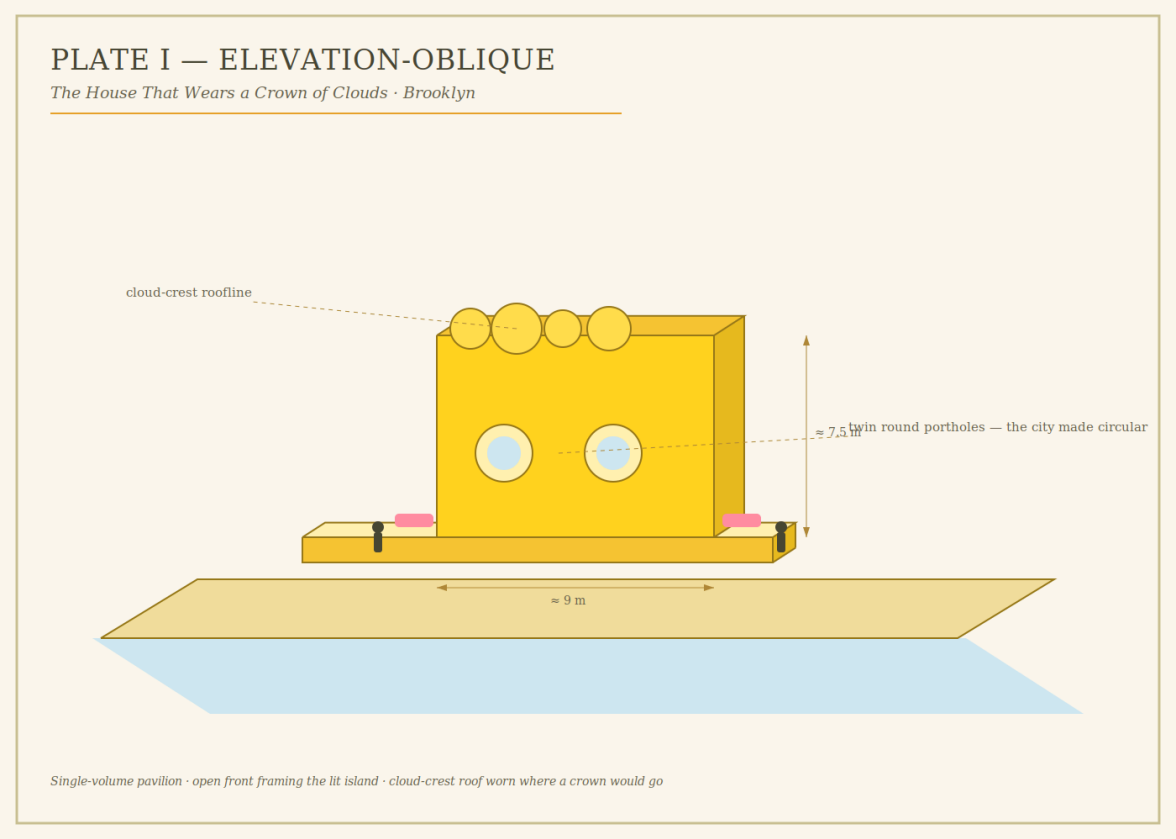


PLATE I — ELEVATION-OBLIQUE
The House That Wears a Crown of Clouds · Brooklyn
cloud-crest roofline
≈ 7,5 m
twin round portholes — the city made circular
≈ 9 m
Single-volume pavilion · open front framing the lit island · cloud-crest roof worn where a crown would go

Elevation-oblique study after Plate I.

Plate II — The Theatre of Two Storeys and the Pink Rake

Queens — recurring motif

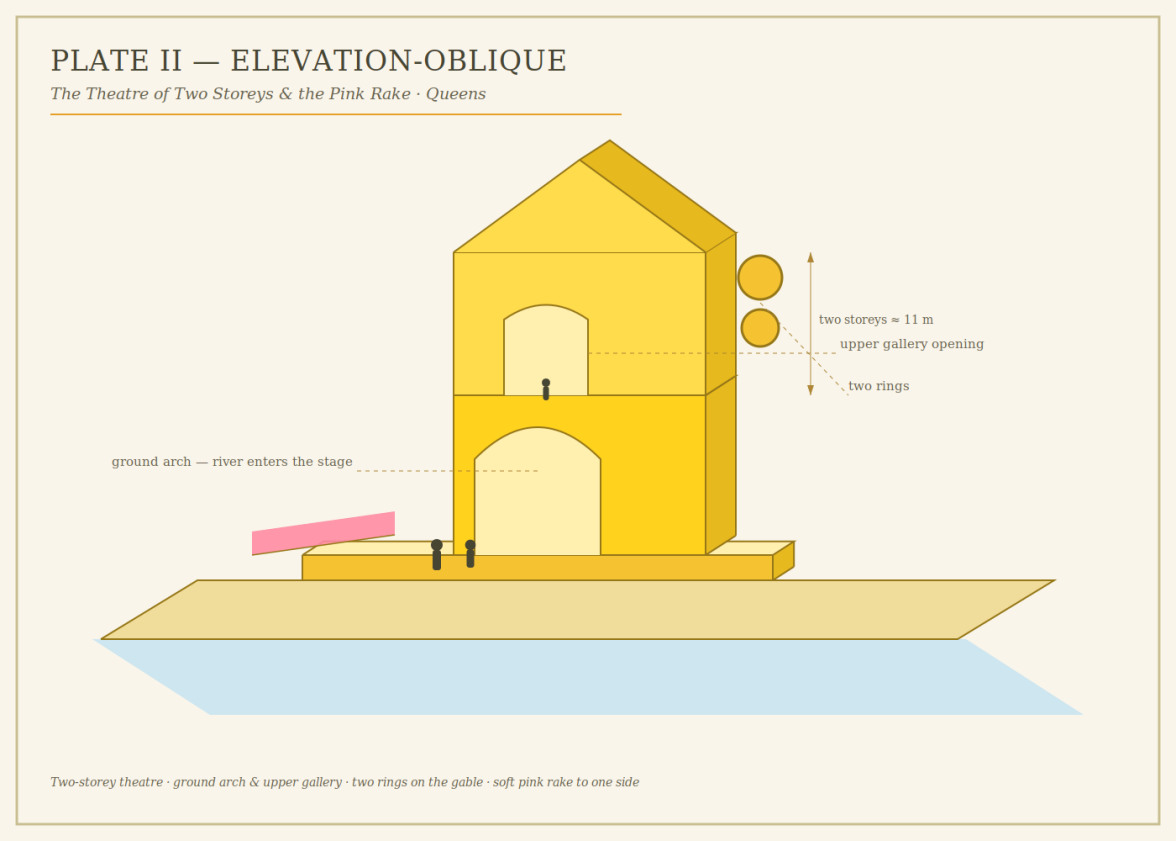


PLATE II — ELEVATION-OBLIQUE
The Theatre of Two Storeys & the Pink Rake · Queens
two storeys ≈ 11 m
upper gallery opening
two rings
ground arch — river enters the stage
Two-storey theatre · ground arch & upper gallery · two rings on the gable · soft pink rake to one side

Elevation-oblique study after Plate II.

Plate III — The Stepped Pavilion of the Open Gable

Brooklyn — the first docking

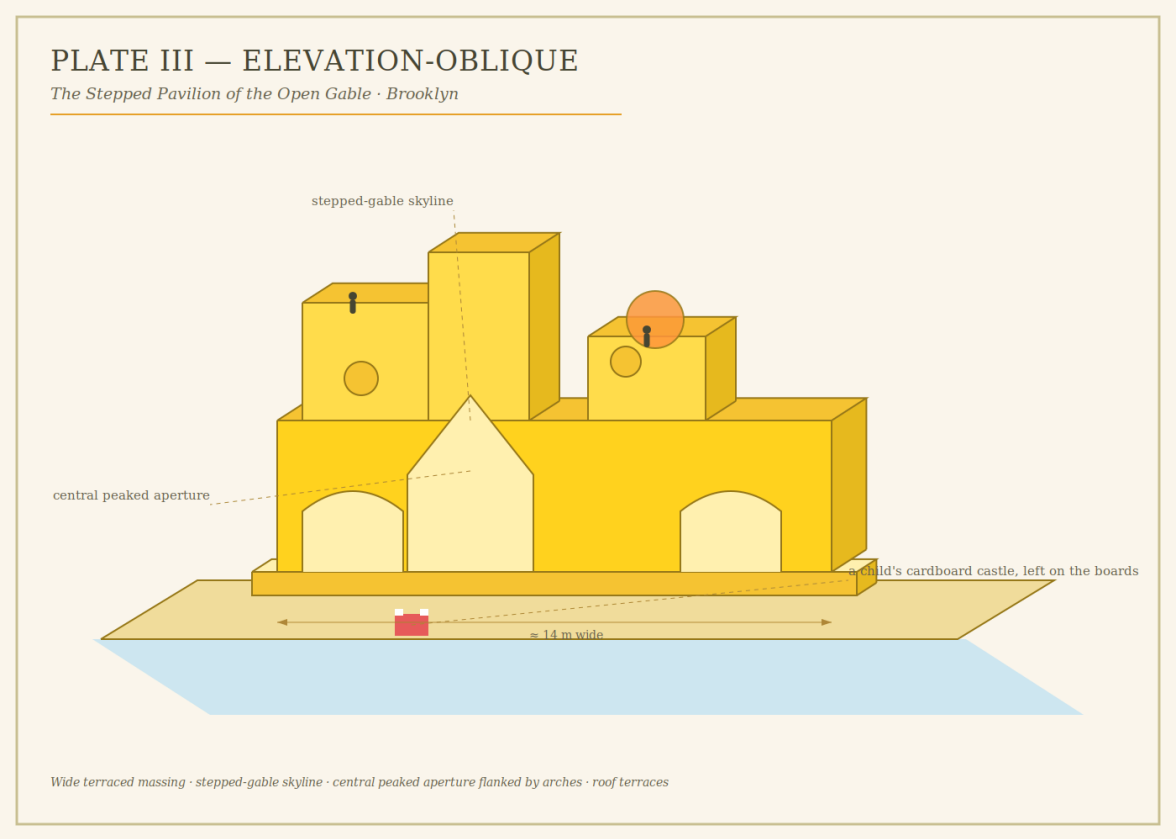


PLATE III — ELEVATION-OBLIQUE
The Stepped Pavilion of the Open Gable · Brooklyn
stepped-gable skyline
central peaked aperture
a child's cardboard castle, left on the boards
≈ 14 m wide
Wide terraced massing · stepped-gable skyline · central peaked aperture flanked by arches · roof terraces

Elevation-oblique study after Plate III.

Plate IV — The Tall House and the Yellow Suns

The Bronx — the third docking

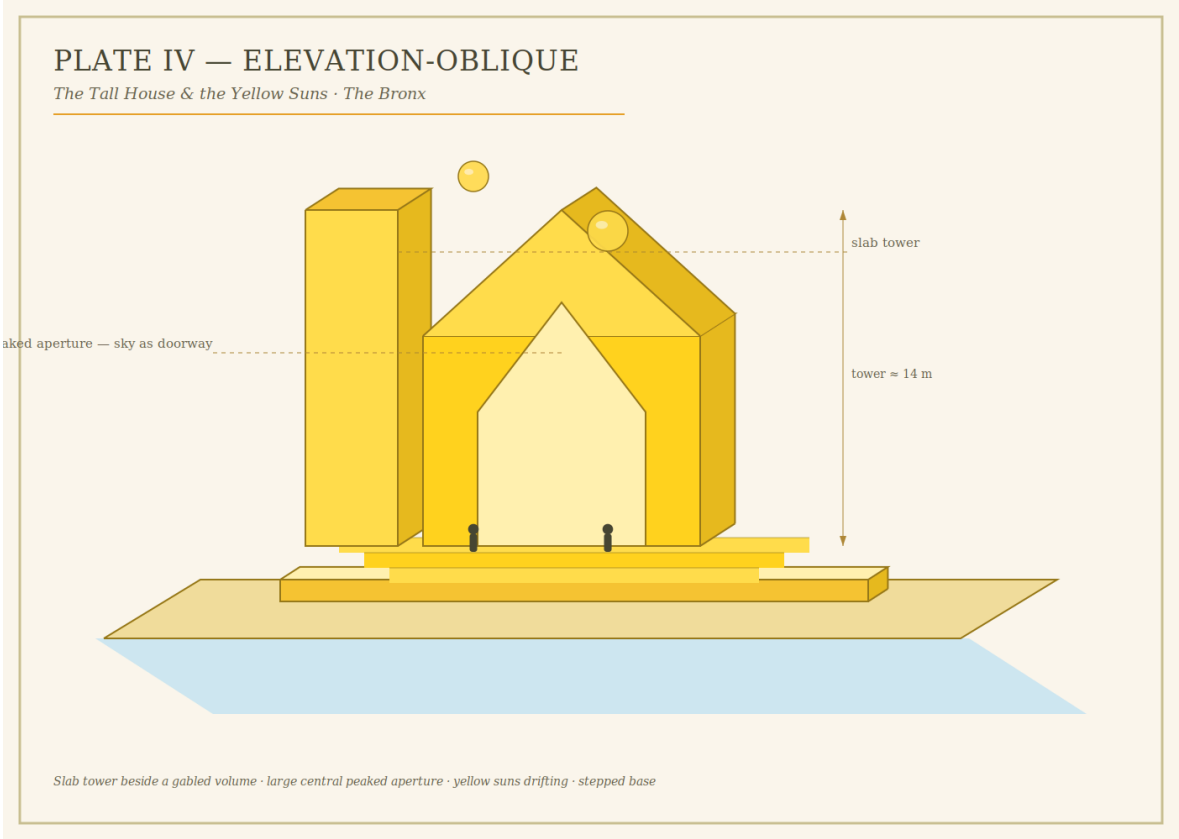


PLATE IV — ELEVATION-OBLIQUE
The Tall House & the Yellow Suns · The Bronx
slab tower
aked aperture — sky as doorway
tower ≈ 14 m
Slab tower beside a gabled volume · large central peaked aperture · yellow suns drifting · stepped base

Elevation-oblique study after Plate IV.

Plate V — The Stair That Climbs Into the Light

Queens — the second docking

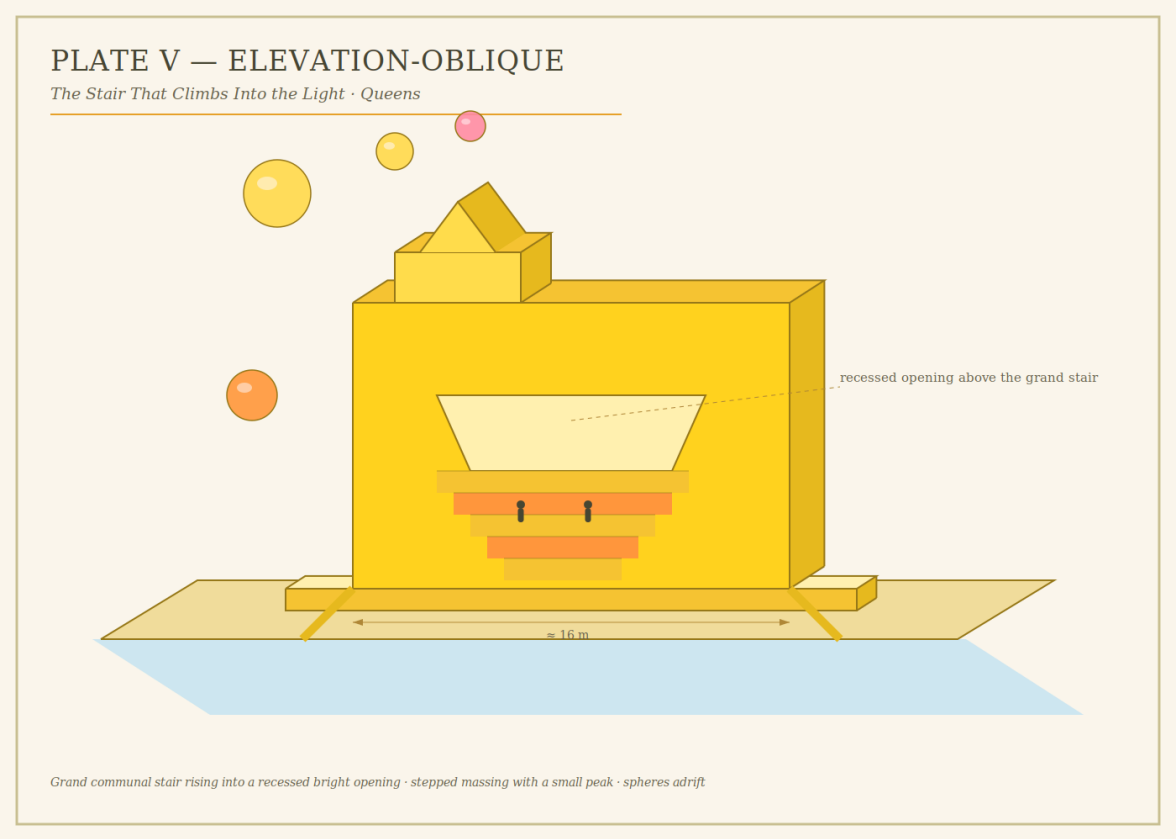


PLATE V — ELEVATION-OBLIQUE
The Stair That Climbs Into the Light · Queens
recessed opening above the grand stair
≈ 16 m
Grand communal stair rising into a recessed bright opening · stepped massing with a small peak · spheres adrift

Elevation-oblique study after Plate V.

Plate VI — The Two Rings and the Upper Room

Queens — the second docking

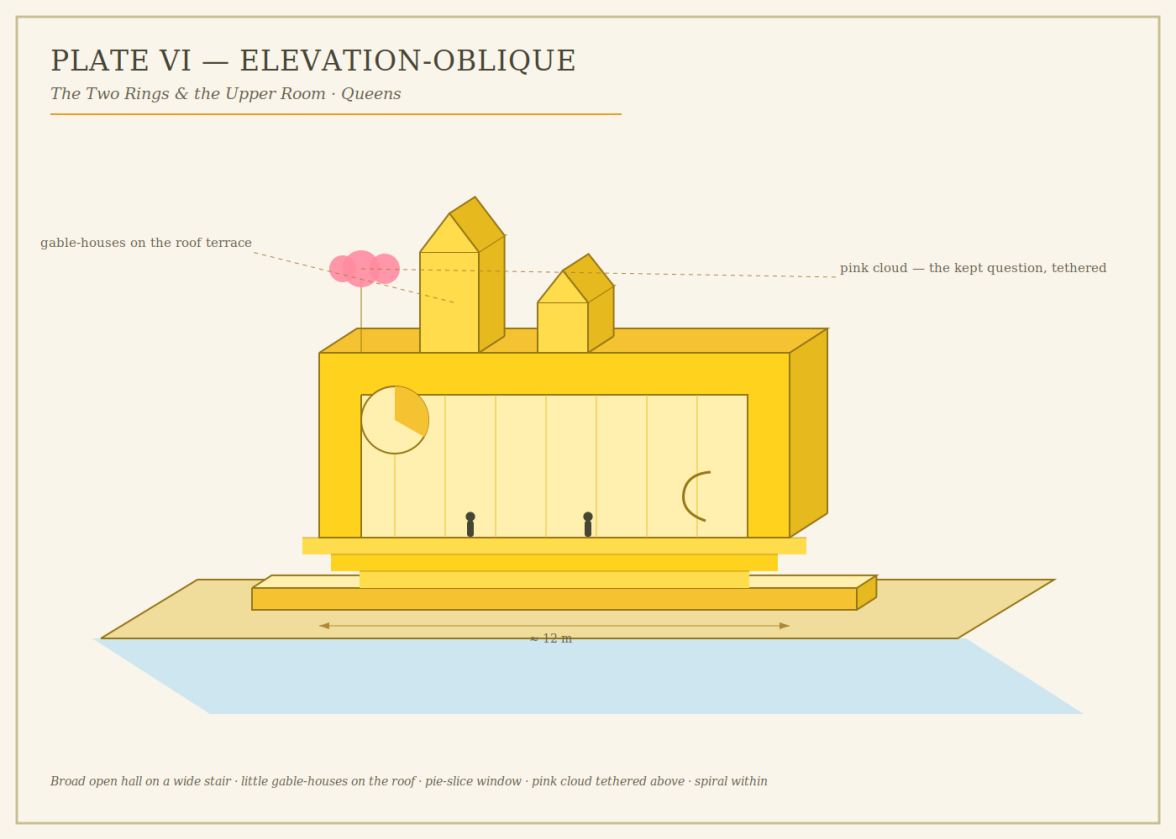


PLATE VI — ELEVATION-OBLIQUE
The Two Rings & the Upper Room · Queens
gable-houses on the roof terrace
pink cloud — the kept question, tethered
≈ 12 m
Broad open hall on a wide stair · little gable-houses on the roof · pie-slice window · pink cloud tethered above · spiral within

Elevation-oblique study after Plate VI.

Plate VII — The Wide Mouth Beneath the Steeples

Queens — the second docking

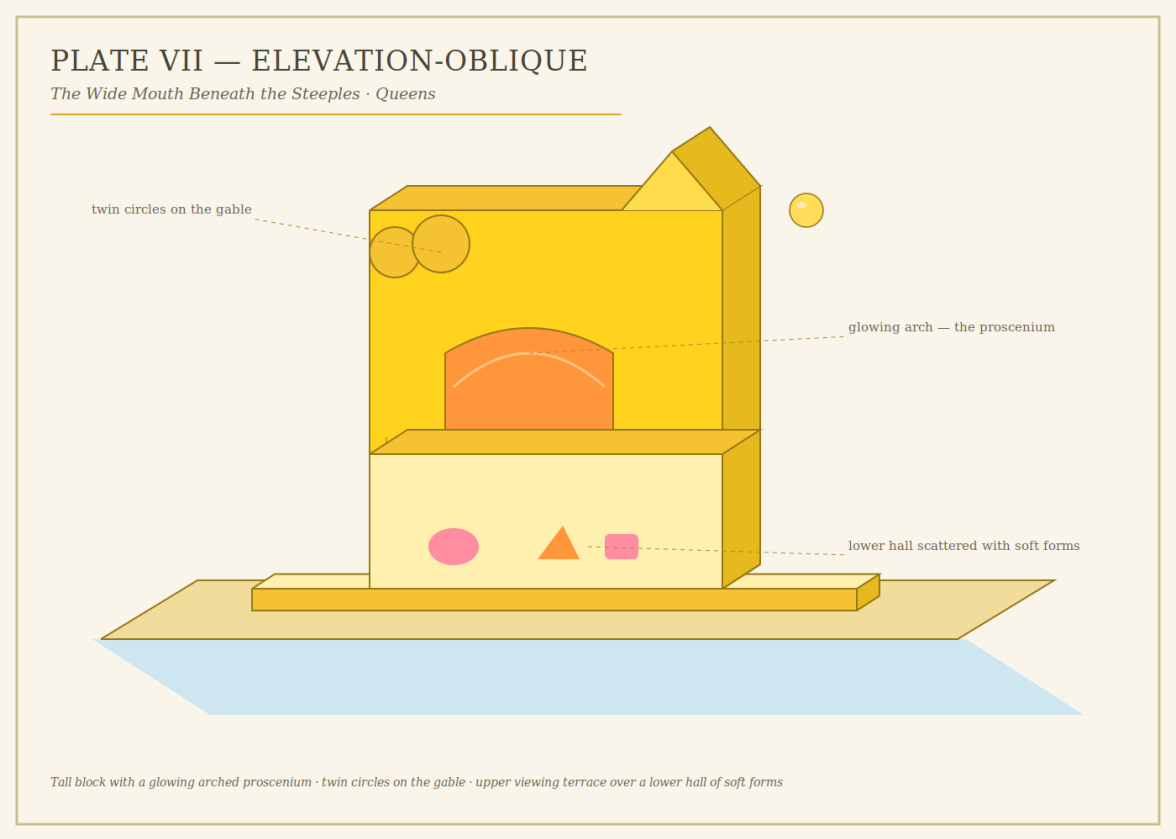


PLATE VII — ELEVATION-OBLIQUE
The Wide Mouth Beneath the Steeples · Queens
twin circles on the gable
glowing arch — the proscenium
lower hall scattered with soft forms
Tall block with a glowing arched proscenium · twin circles on the gable · upper viewing terrace over a lower hall of soft forms

Elevation-oblique study after Plate VII.

Plate VIII — The Theatre With the Glowing Arch

The Bronx — the third docking

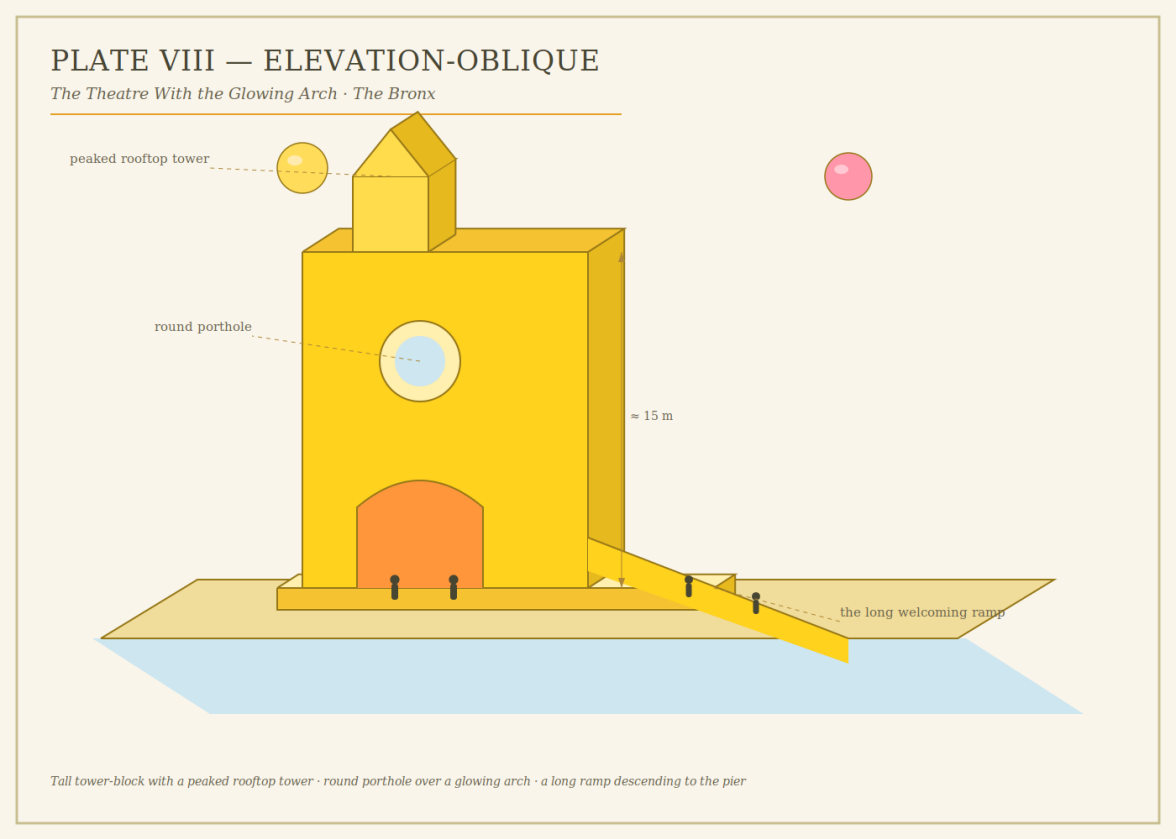


PLATE VIII — ELEVATION-OBLIQUE
The Theatre With the Glowing Arch · The Bronx
peaked rooftop tower
round porthole
≈ 15 m
the long welcoming ramp
Tall tower-block with a peaked rooftop tower · round porthole over a glowing arch · a long ramp descending to the pier

Elevation-oblique study after Plate VIII.

Plate IX — The Yellow House With the Pink Moons

The Bronx — the third docking

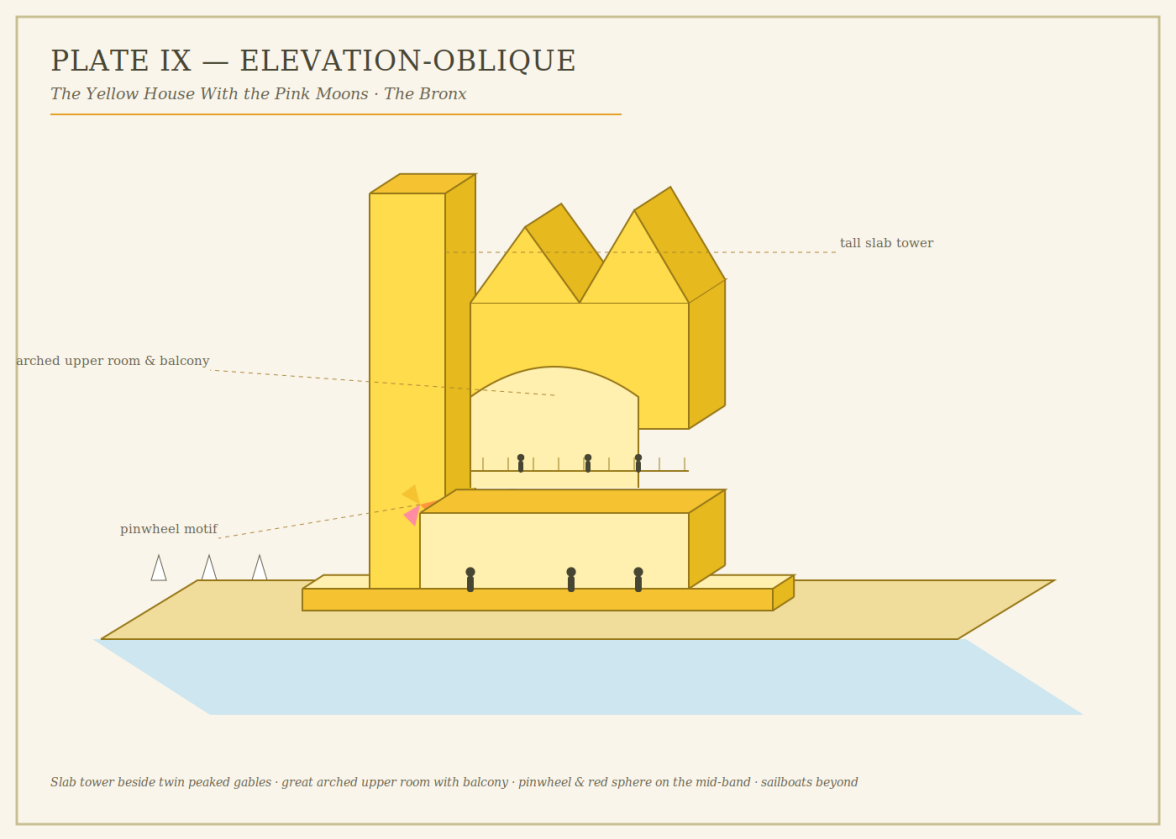


PLATE IX — ELEVATION-OBLIQUE
The Yellow House With the Pink Moons · The Bronx
tall slab tower
arched upper room & balcony
pinwheel motif
Slab tower beside twin peaked gables · great arched upper room with balcony · pinwheel & red sphere on the mid-band · sailboats beyond

Elevation-oblique study after Plate IX.

Plate X — The Floating Room With the Sailboats

The Bronx — the third docking

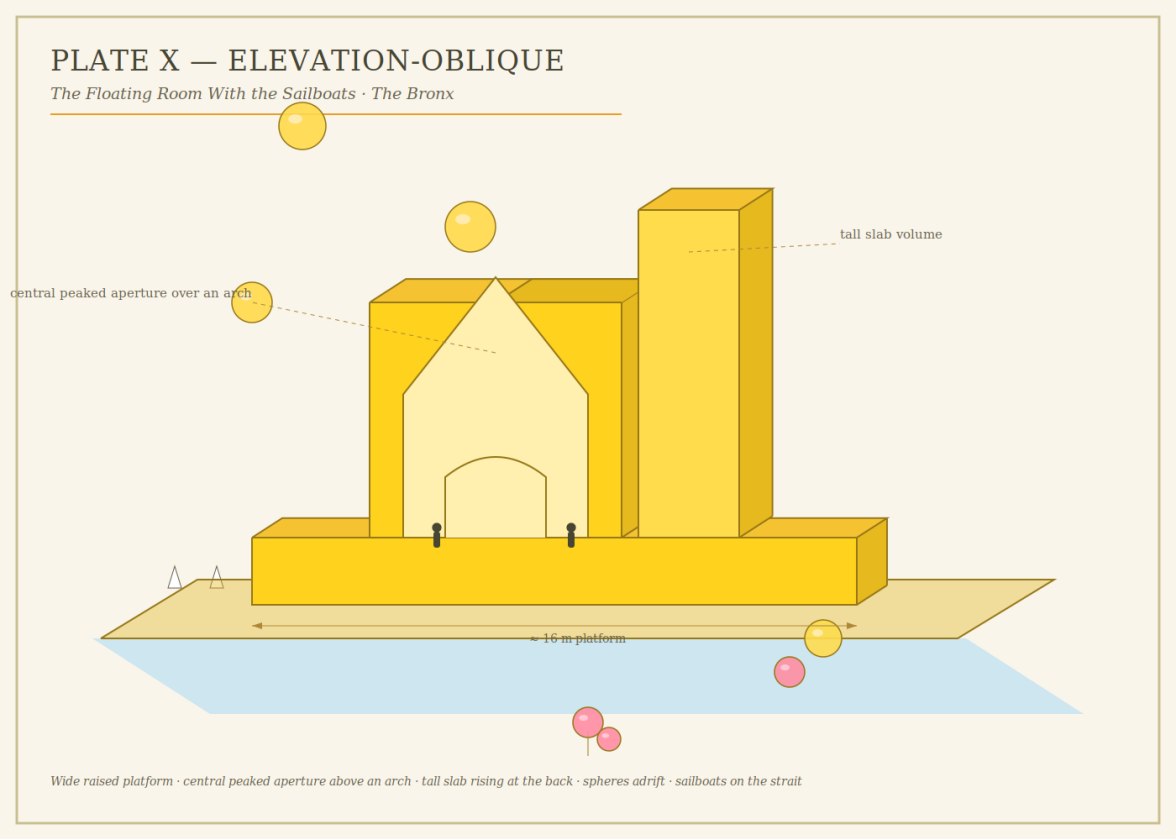


PLATE X — ELEVATION-OBLIQUE
The Floating Room With the Sailboats · The Bronx
tall slab volume
central peaked aperture over an arch
≈ 16 m platform
Wide raised platform · central peaked aperture above an arch · tall slab rising at the back · spheres adrift · sailboats on the strait

Elevation-oblique study after Plate X.

Plate XI — The Pinwheel and the Spiral Descent

Queens — the second docking

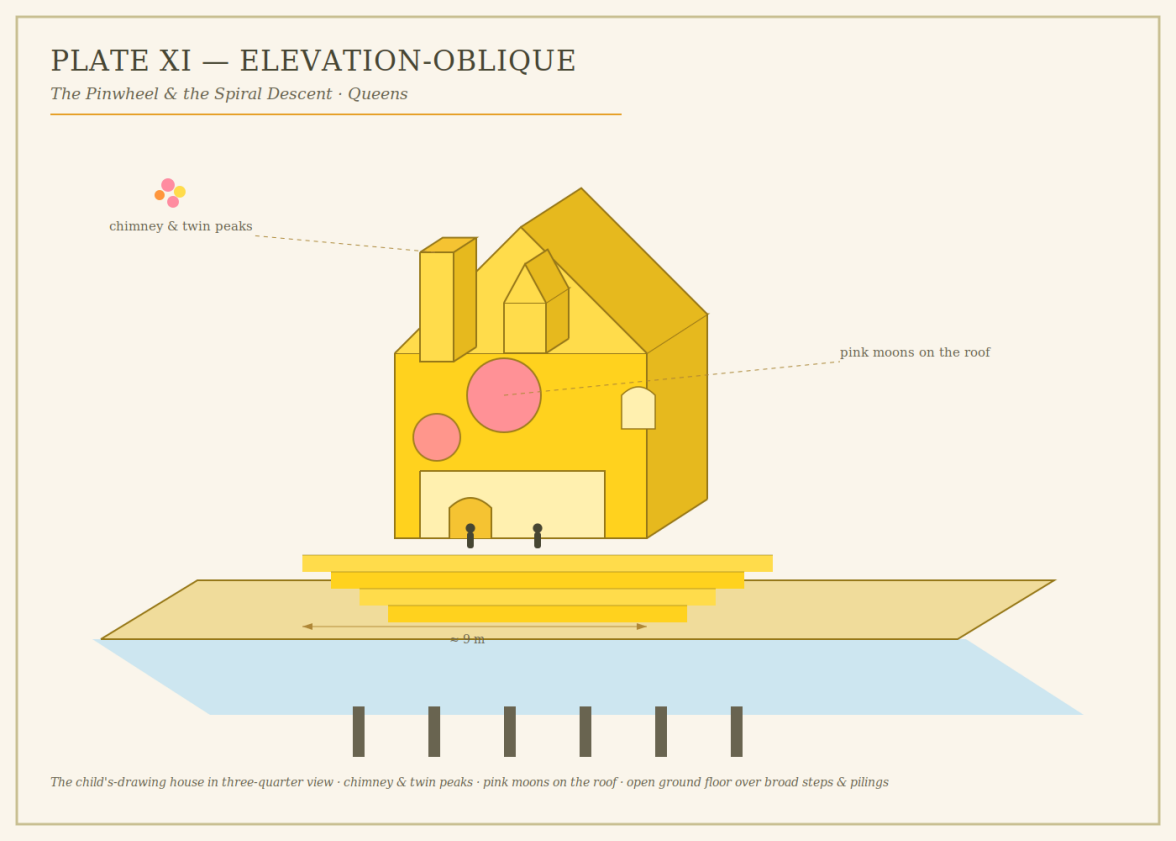


PLATE XI — ELEVATION-OBLIQUE
The Pinwheel & the Spiral Descent · Queens
chimney & twin peaks
pink moons on the roof
≈ 9 m
The child's-drawing house in three-quarter view · chimney & twin peaks · pink moons on the roof · open ground floor over broad steps & pilings

Elevation-oblique study after Plate XI.

Plate XII — The Cliff of Steps

The Bronx — the third docking

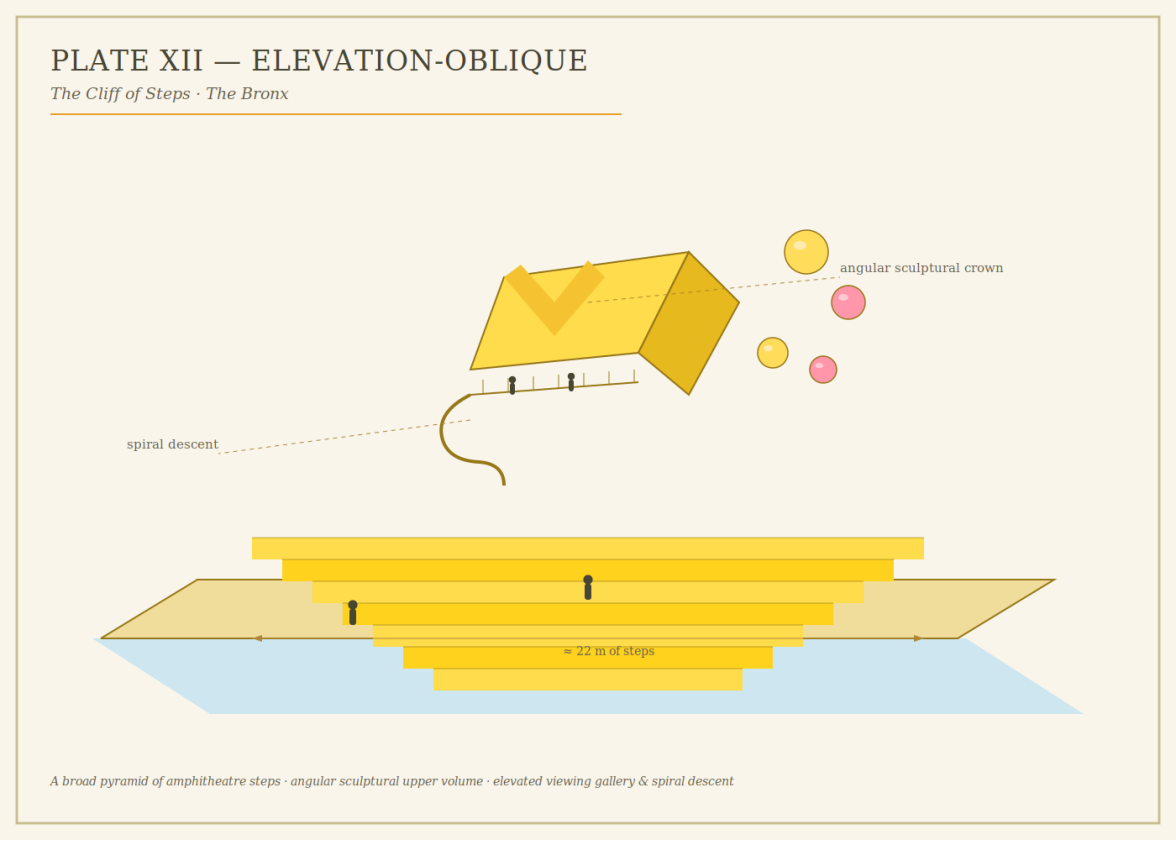


PLATE XII — ELEVATION-OBLIQUE
The Cliff of Steps · The Bronx
angular sculptural crown
spiral descent
≈ 22 m of steps
A broad pyramid of amphitheatre steps · angular sculptural upper volume · elevated viewing gallery & spiral descent

Elevation-oblique study after Plate XII.

Plate XIII — The Hall of the Hanging Lamps

Queens — the second docking

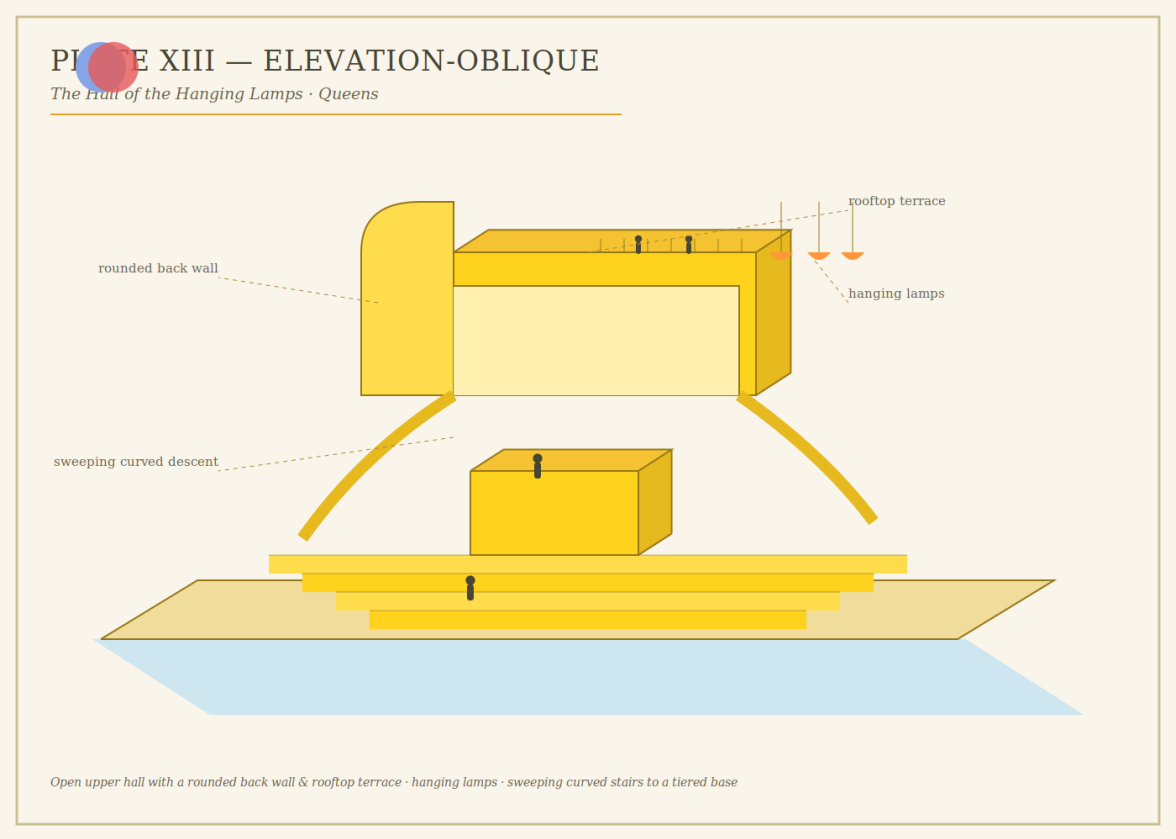


PLATE XIII — ELEVATION-OBLIQUE
The Hall of the Hanging Lamps · Queens
rooftop terrace
rounded back wall
hanging lamps
sweeping curved descent
Open upper hall with a rounded back wall & rooftop terrace · hanging lamps · sweeping curved stairs to a tiered base

Elevation-oblique study after Plate XIII.

Plate XIV — The Twin Gables and the Round Eye

The Bronx — the third docking

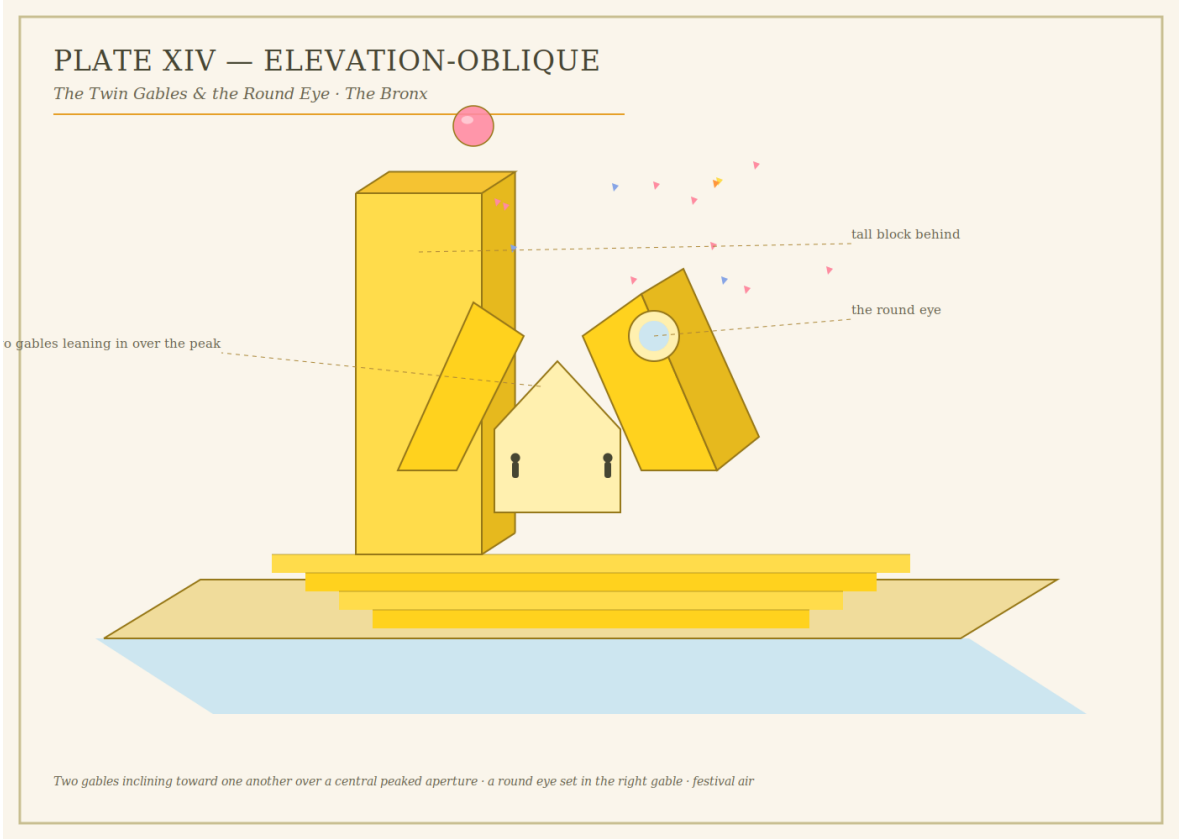


PLATE XIV — ELEVATION-OBLIQUE
The Twin Gables & the Round Eye · The Bronx
tall block behind
the round eye
o gables leaning in over the peak
Two gables inclining toward one another over a central peaked aperture · a round eye set in the right gable · festival air

Elevation-oblique study after Plate XIV.

Plate XV — The Bridge That Is Dreamed, Not Built

The Coda — the linkage of all shores to the island

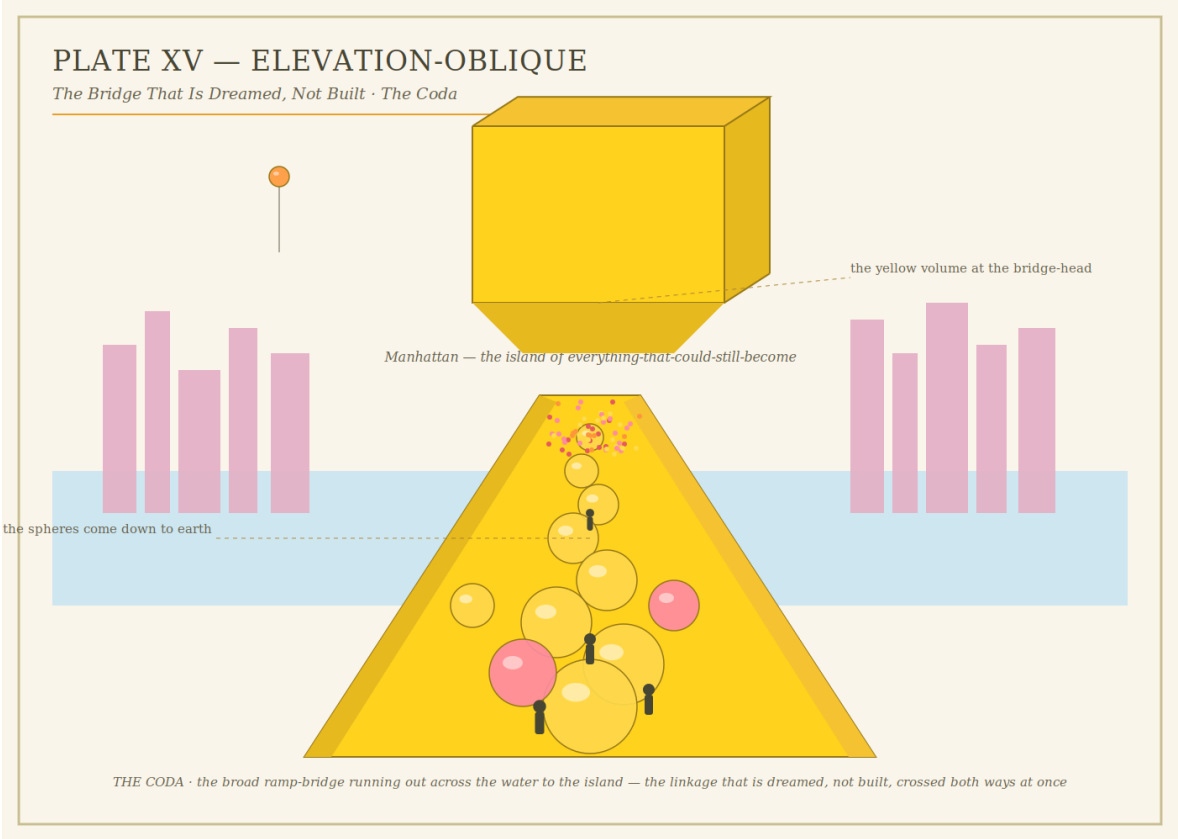


PLATE XV — ELEVATION-OBLIQUE
The Bridge That Is Dreamed, Not Built · The Coda
the yellow volume at the bridge-head
Manhattan — the island of everything-that-could-still-become
the spheres come down to earth
THE CODA · the broad ramp-bridge running out across the water to the island — the linkage that is dreamed, not built, crossed both ways at once

Elevation-oblique study after Plate XV.

Colophon

This illustrated novella was set in a season on the East River and recorded afterward on the shore by Surjan, who is not one person.

The architectural plates number fifteen and are reproduced in the Catalogue. The chart of the river and the three elevation-oblique studies of the dockings were drawn to accompany this account; the chart places Manhattan where it belongs, in the middle of the honest water, the island of everything-that-could-still-become.

The Foreword is given in the voice of the Harbormaster of Mornings, who logs the tides and who left, in the column for the dreamed bridge, the blank that is the correct way to record the truth.

All persons in this book are genderqueer and non-binary, including the author, including — the author hopes — the reader, in whatever way the reader is most fully and bravely themselves. The pronoun throughout is they, which is the pronoun of the fleet, of the crew, of the more-than-one that each of us turns out, on the honest water, to be.

It was always yellow at the core.

BOOK THREE · THE LONG MORNING

THE BREATH OF THE ISLAND

A Field Guide to the
Twenty-Three Towers of Radical Joy

Inwood → the Battery

"Stand at the right place on a smoke morning and look up
and you will see it: the towers passing the breath south
like a bucket line, like a phone tree,
like the old networks of people
who learned to pass word along a chain
because no single one of them
could be trusted to the official channels."

— from the long Interlude

THE BREATH OF THE ISLAND

A Field Guide to the Twenty-Three Towers of Radical Joy

Surjan

(they / them)

a novella

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III. Miró of the Long Neck — the Stretching Breath · Washington Heights
IV. Sisko & Sash — the Twinned Breath · Hamilton Heights
V. Vesper — the Dusk Breath · Morningside
VI. Jubilée — the Borrowed-Music Breath · Harlem
VII. Pimentó — the Overfed Breath · East Harlem
VIII. Fern — the Shade Breath · Central Park North
IX. Columbine — the Recognition Breath · Upper West Side
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XI. Aria — the Resonant Breath · Lincoln Square
XII. Meridian — the Noon Breath · Midtown West
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Interlude — The Long Conversation
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XIV. Quietude — the Courtesy Breath · Murray Hill
XV. Proud Mary-of-the-Piers — the Seen Breath · Chelsea
XVI. Sibyl — the Coincidence Breath · Flatiron
XVII. Locket — the Secret Breath · Gramercy
XVIII. Fig — the Idle Breath · Greenwich Village
XIX. Riot — the Crowd Breath · East Village
XX. Pomme — the Baker's Breath · SoHo
XXI. Delancey — the Old-Neighbor Breath · Lower East Side
XXII. Glass-and-Milk — the Clear-Light Breath · Tribeca
XXIII. Omega & the Harbor Mother — the Last Breath · The Battery

Afterword — On Leaving the Smoke Behind
Catalogue of Architectural Plates
Colophon

A Field Guide to the Twenty-Three Towers of Radical Joy

**by Surjan* (they / them)*

a novella

FOREWORD

On Being Asked to Explain the Smoke

A child on the uptown 1 train once asked me what the smoke was for.

They were small enough that their feet did not reach the floor, and they swung them while they waited, and they had been watching through the window the way the white columns rose out of the borough and bent at their tops into something soft. What is the smoke for, they said. Not what is it — they were past that, they were six, they had decided the towers were ordinary the way children decide the sun is ordinary — but what is it for, which is the harder question, the one the grown people on the train had long ago agreed not to ask.

I opened my mouth to answer and found that I could not do it in a sentence.

I tried. I said: the smoke is joy. The child looked at me with the particular contempt the young reserve for adults who have given a small answer to a large question. So I tried again. I said: when something good happens on the island — when two strangers laugh at the same moment, when a loaf comes out of the oven exactly right, when someone forgives someone else without being asked — the nearest tower feels it, and breathes, and the breath comes down over the rooftops as a kind of weather, and the weather makes more of the good thing it came from. The child considered this. Then they said, so it's a machine, and I said no, and they said, so it's an animal, and I said not quite, and they said, so what is it, and the train came into my station, and I got off, and I have been writing this book ever since.

I should tell you plainly what I believe, so that you can disagree with me from the start and we can still be friends. I believe joy is not soft. I believe it is the most radical act available to a person in a city that was built, brick by brick, to teach them to keep their joy small and private and apologetic, to spend it only on weekends, to ration it like a wartime sugar. I believe the towers are a refusal of all that. I believe they are alive, in the way a thing is alive when it breathes and changes and cannot be owned. And I believe — though I cannot prove it, and the engineers I have asked become uncomfortable and change the subject — that no one built them, and that everyone did.

There are twenty-three of them. They stand along the spine of the island from Inwood in the north to the Battery in the south, and each of them is three, sometimes four times higher than anything else we have ever managed to build, so that on a clear morning you can stand at the bottom of the island and see the whole row of them lined up like a sentence you have not finished reading. Each one has a name. I did not give them their names; I only listened until I heard them. Each one is, as I am, neither wholly one thing nor wholly another — they wear their forms the way I wear mine, gladly, and without explanation, and they answer to they. And each one breathes a joy that is entirely its own and entirely unlike its neighbor's, so that to walk the length of the island is to be changed twenty-three separate times.

This book is the closest I can come to answering the child. It is a field guide, which means it is meant to be carried, and opened out of doors, and disagreed with. There is a chapter for each tower. There is a plate for each tower, drawn as carefully as I could manage, because I wanted you to be able to see them even on the days the smoke is too high to make them out. There is a map, so that you will know where to stand.

What there is not, anywhere in these pages, is the sentence the child wanted. I have made my peace with this. Some things are too large to be said and can only be walked through, the way you cannot describe a cathedral to someone but you can take them inside and let the size do the talking.

So: come inside. Start in the north, where the island is narrowest and the first of them stands over the river holding the morning. Her name — their name — is Áveline.

— *S.*

INTRODUCTION

The Island That Learned to Breathe

There is a way of telling the story that makes it sound like engineering, and a way that makes it sound like a fairy tale, and both are lies, though the fairy tale is the more useful lie and so I will lean on it.

Here is the fairy tale. The island, for most of its life, held its breath. You can see it in the old photographs — the grid coming up the land like a held breath made of streets, every block square, every corner true, the whole place clenched against itself in the particular way of a city that has decided joy is a private matter to be conducted indoors with the curtains drawn. The island worked. It worked tremendously. It became the working capital of the working world, and it taught everyone who came to it the great lesson of the held breath, which is that you may have your joy on the weekend, in small amounts, if you have earned it, and not before.

And then one morning — no one agrees on the year, and I have stopped asking — the island let the breath out.

It happened at the northern tip first, where the last forest still grew, where the land had never been fully clenched. A volute appeared. Just one, curling up out of the rock over Inwood, gold and rose, the first soft curve in a city of right angles, and from its top came a thread of white smoke, and where the smoke came down the people felt — for no reason any of them could name — the small fierce gladness of being the first one awake. They did not know what it was. They thought it was simply a good morning. They were right.

After the first came the others, down the spine of the island, one at a time, each taller than the last building around it, each curving where the city was straight, each breathing a joy of its own. By the time anyone thought to count them there were twenty-three, and by the time anyone thought to name them they had already, in the way of living things, named themselves, and would answer only to what they were.

That is the fairy tale, and every word of it is true except the ones that are merely useful.

Here is the rule of the thing, stated as plainly as I can manage, because a field guide owes you at least one plain statement: When radical joy occurs anywhere on the island, the nearest tower feels it, and breathes, and the breath comes down as a potion that makes more of the joy it came from. That is the whole mechanism. The towers do not create joy from nothing — they are not factories, whatever the engineers' diagrams suggest. They are closer to lungs. They breathe in the joy that is already happening, the small unnoticed daily joy that the held-breath city had taught everyone to suppress, and they breathe it back out amplified, multiplied, made visible as smoke and made contagious as weather, so that one person's private gladness becomes a whole neighborhood's, and the neighborhood's becomes the island's, and the island's — at the very bottom, at the Battery, where the last and largest of them stands — becomes the sea's.

I call this radical joy, and I mean the word radical in its old sense, the root sense: joy at the root. Not joy as decoration, joy as garnish, joy as the reward for suffering correctly. Joy as the radix, the thing underneath, the ground the whole city secretly stands on and had agreed to pretend was something harder. The towers are the island's confession. They are the held breath finally let go. They are twenty-three enormous curving admissions, in gold and rose, eleven hundred feet over the rooftops, that the working capital of the working world was, all along, dying to be glad.

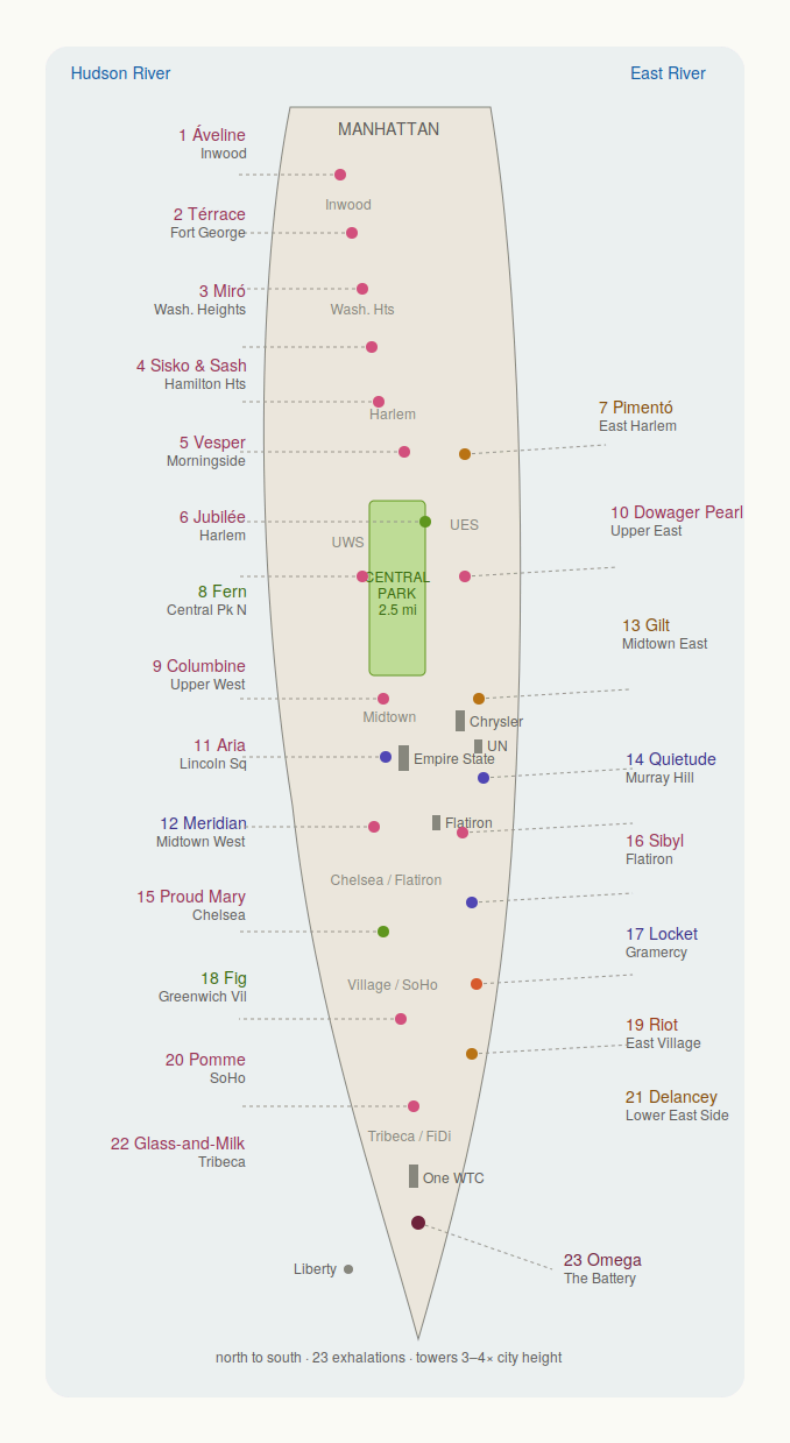
They are also — and this is the thing I did not understand at first, and that changes everything once you do — a community. Not twenty-three solitary wonders standing apart, each minding its own neighborhood, but a family that chose itself: they know each other, they speak to each other along the smoke, they cover for the one who needs to rest and surround the one who has gone dark until its light returns. They learned this from the island's own people — from the chosen families who have always built radical joy here, in ballrooms and back rooms and painted-over bars and parades that began as riots, out of a city that told them to keep their joy small. The towers breathe in that lineage. I will show you the conversation later, in the middle of the book, where the plain secrets go; for now only know that no tower breathes alone, and that this, more than their height or their gold, is what makes them what they are.

I have organized this guide the only way the island can honestly be read: north to south, the way you would walk it, the way the smoke descends, the way the first light moves down the rivers in the morning. We will go tower by tower, from Áveline at the green northern point to Omega and the Harbor Mother at the southern water. Each has a chapter. Each has a plate, drawn from life, that you may consult on the days the smoke hangs too low to see them. There is a map at the front so that you will know where you are standing.

I ask only one thing of you as you read. Do not read it as a list of attractions. Read it as a sentence — a single long bright sentence the island is speaking, north to south, one word at a time, that begins with the joy of being first awake and ends with the joy of letting everything go to sea, and that means, from end to end, underneath all twenty-three of its clauses, only and exactly this: you are not alone, and you were built — we all were — to be glad.

The unit of the sentence is the breath. We call each one an exhalation. There are twenty-three. Here is the first.

A MAP OF THE ISLAND



The Island — twenty-three towers, north to south

I. ÁVELINE

the First Breath · Inwood

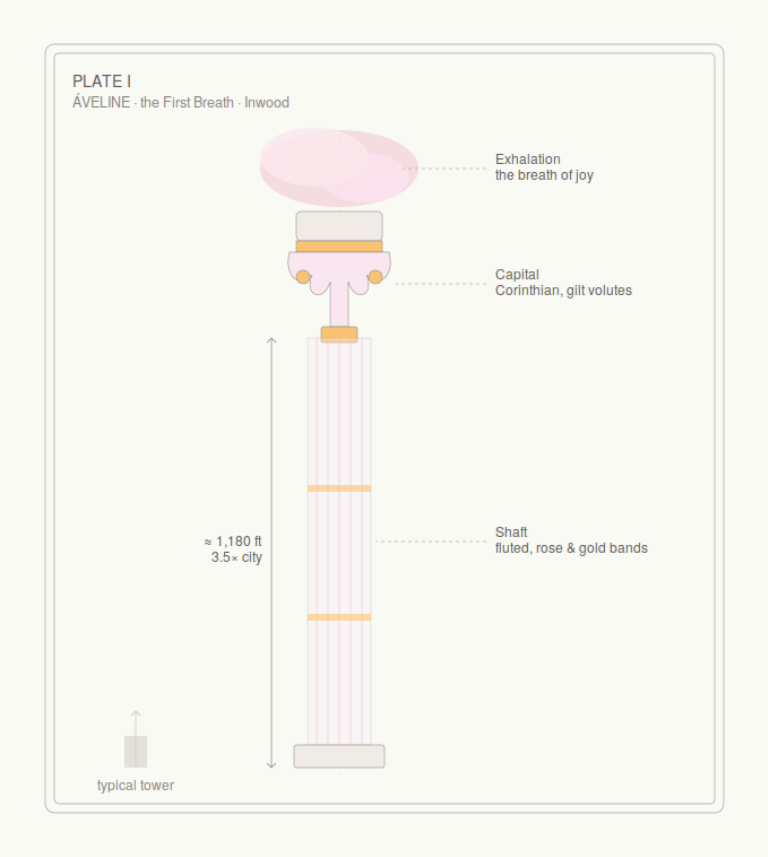


Plate I — architectural elevation

You have to be awake before the city to meet Áveline properly, and almost no one is, which is exactly the joy they breathe.

They stand at the northern tip of the island, where Manhattan thins to a green point and the two rivers have not yet decided to become the harbor. From their feet the land falls away into trees — actual trees, the last of the old forest, the ones that were here before the grid came up the island counting everything into blocks. Áveline likes the trees. They told me so, in the way they tell things, which is not in words but in the temperature of the air around their lowest band of gilt, where the rose of the shaft warms a half-degree when they are pleased. I spent a whole October learning to read that band. It was the best October of my life.

Their capital is Corinthian, the most elaborate of the old orders, a basket of carved acanthus leaves with two small gilt volutes curling out at the corners like the first two notes of a song. The flutes of their shaft run straight down for what the engineers tell me is eleven hundred and eighty feet, banded twice in gold, rose-colored as the inside of a shell. When the light comes up the rivers in the morning it strikes Áveline first of all the towers, because they are the northmost and the tallest thing for miles, and for a few minutes before it reaches anyone else they hold the entire sunrise alone. And then —

because they are the first awake, and the first awake has a duty — they pass it on. I am awake, their breath says, north to south, down the long row. The light is coming. Is everyone awake? And one by one, down the island, the others stir.

That is the joy. I have tried many times to name it more precisely and the best I have done is this: Áveline breathes the joy of being the first one awake.

Not the loneliness of it — there is a loneliness to being awake before everyone, and Áveline does not breathe that, the towers are very exact about what they will and will not give you. They breathe the other thing, the small fierce private gladness of the person who rises in the dark and makes their coffee and stands at the window and watches the light come and knows, for one uncountable minute, that the whole waking world is theirs and theirs only, unasked-for, unearned, a gift left out overnight by someone who slipped away before they could be thanked.

I will tell you who it reaches, because the towers are only as real as the people they touch.

It reaches Mrs. Okonkwo on Seaman Avenue, who is eighty-one and sleeps badly. She has come, over the bad-sleeping years, to think of four in the morning as an enemy — the hour the apartment is most empty, the hour her husband's absence is loudest, the hour the ceiling has memorized. For a long time she fought it. She would lie rigid and furious, counting the cracks of light around the blind, willing herself back under, and the willing only made her more awake, and the more awake she was the more the empty hour pressed on her, until four in the morning became a thing she dreaded from the moment the sun went down. Then the autumn came, and with it the smoke — for Áveline breathes most often in the cold months, when the air sits low enough to hold the breath down over the rooftops — and one morning Mrs. Okonkwo woke at four as always and found, instead of the enemy, the gift. She could not have said what was different. The apartment was the same. The absence was the same. But the hour had turned its face. She got up. She made her coffee, the real way, the slow way she had stopped bothering with. She carried the cup to the window over the park and she stood there as the light came up the rivers, and she understood — not in words, the way the towers do not speak in words — that she was not the woman the night had abandoned but the woman the morning had chosen, the keeper of the waking world, the one entrusted with the first hour while everyone else lay defenseless in their sleep. It was an honor. She had been selected. She does not know about the tower. She thinks it is simply a good morning, and that she has, late in life, made some private peace with four o'clock. This is correct. She has. The tower would be the last to claim otherwise; the towers never take the credit, it is the first rule of their community, the joy belongs to the one who feels it.

It reaches the man who drives the first northbound bus, whose name I never learned, and who sings in the empty bus where no one can hear him, badly, with enormous feeling, the whole length of Broadway down from the depot. On the smoke mornings he sings a half-key higher and does not notice and does not care, and the empty bus carries his bad joyful singing down through the dark neighborhoods like a small mobile dawn, and somewhere south of him Jubilée, who loves a

borrowed song more than anything, catches the thread of it on the breath and is delighted, and passes it down.

It reaches, once, me — on the morning I first heard Áveline's name, when I had been awake all night for no reason I could defend, and came up to the north of the island emptied out and gray, and stood under them as the light arrived, and felt the gray fill in with something I had not felt since I was young enough to swing my feet on a train. I understood then that I was not going to be able to leave this alone. That there was a book in it. That I had been, in some sense I am still working out, summoned — not by a voice, the towers have no voices, but by a temperature, a half-degree of warmth in a band of gilt, eleven hundred feet over the last forest on the island, at four in the morning, in the cold.

Here is what I cannot decide, and will leave undecided, because the book is young and so are we. Does Áveline make the joy, or only notice it? When Mrs. Okonkwo stands at her window, is the gladness coming down from the tower into her, or up from her into the tower, or is the distinction one of those grid-lines we drew across the island for our own convenience and then mistook for a fact of the land? I have stood under them all October and I do not know. What I know is the warmth in the band, and the light coming up the river, and the particular gladness of being, for one minute, the first one awake — and that Áveline does not keep it. Áveline is the first member of the community to stir each day, and the first thing they do with the joy is turn south and offer it to the others, the way the earliest riser in a house of people who love each other puts the coffee on for everyone before taking a single sip. The first breath is not a solitary breath. It only looks that way from the street, before you know that the towers are a family, and that even the lonely sunrise was always being shared.

You are awake now. Good. Come south with me. The light is moving and the others are beginning to stir.

II. TÉRRACE-WHO-LEANS

the Leaning Breath · Fort George

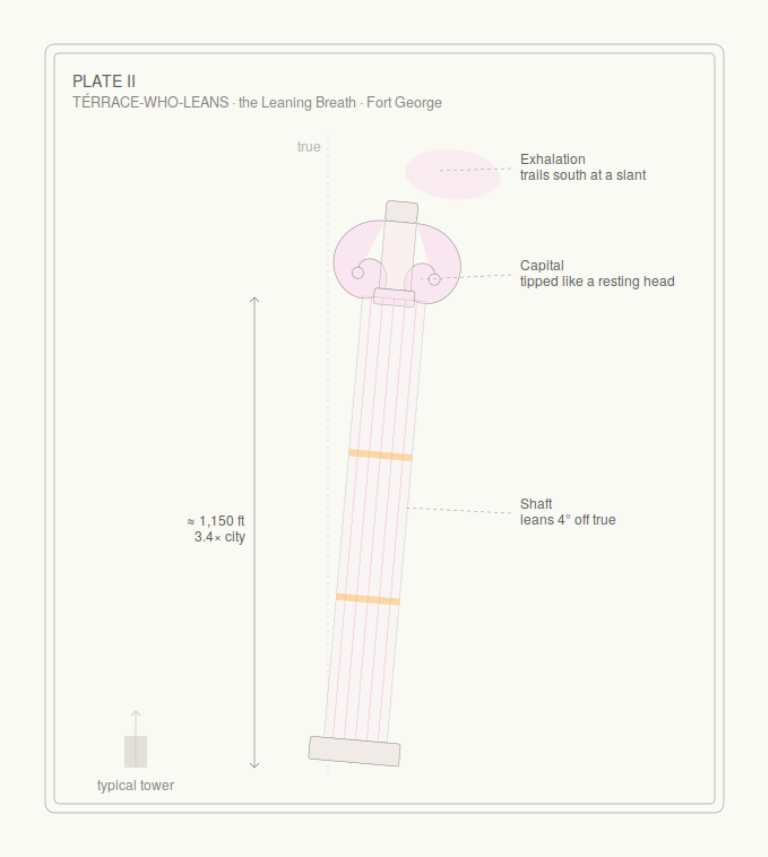


Plate II — architectural elevation

The second tower does not stand up straight, and has never once apologized for it.

Térrace rises over Fort George, on the high ridge where the island remembers that it is, underneath everything, a spine of rock — the neighborhood climbs and the streets give up their right angles and start to bend with the land, and Térrace bends with them. They lean. Not much; an architect would call it four degrees off true and reach nervously for their instruments. But you can see it from the street, the way you can see when a person is leaning toward someone they love across a table: the whole great rose-and-cream column of them inclined a little to the south, their double-volute capital tipped like a head resting on a shoulder, the white exhalation coming off them at a slant and trailing down the ridge toward the rest of the island as if pointing the way.

And in a sense it is pointing the way, because Térrace leans south, toward the others, toward the long row of the community running down the island — and they have leaned that way so long that I have come to read the incline as a kind of devotion, a tower bowed permanently toward its family, never quite upright because never quite willing to face away from the ones it loves.

For years the engineers wanted to correct it. They came with their cables and their calculations. They explained, gently at first and then less gently, that a leaning tower is a frightened tower, a tower in the early stages of a long catastrophe, and that the responsible thing, the kind thing, was to pull them true. Térrace let them measure. Térrace let them fret. Térrace did not straighten. And the cables they strung went slack by morning, every morning, no matter how they were tightened — not snapped, the engineers were always careful to note, not failed, simply slack, as though the tower had spent the night gently insisting, and eventually — this is the part the engineers cannot explain and so do not mention — eventually everyone understood that the lean was not a flaw to be fixed but the entire point of them, and the cables were quietly taken down, and Térrace went on leaning, and the neighborhood, which had been holding its breath, exhaled.

The joy they breathe is the joy of leaning on something that holds.

You know it. Everyone knows it, though we are taught young to be ashamed of needing it. It is the joy of the full weight given over — of letting yourself rest against another person, or a railing, or a wall warm from the sun, and feeling it take you, and not give, and not even strain; the joy not of being held up, which implies you were falling, but of being leaned upon and met, which is a different and rarer thing, and which the body remembers from before it had words, from the time when leaning on someone larger was simply what the world was made of.

It reaches Idris, who is fourteen and has decided this year that he no longer leans on anyone. Leaning is for children, he has concluded, somewhere in the long humiliating negotiation of becoming a man too early, and he carries the decision around like a heavy coat in summer, holding himself apart on the train, holding himself apart at home, holding himself rigid against the wide soft temptation of resting on anyone for anything. It costs him. You can see what it costs him; he is fourteen and exhausted from the labor of needing nothing. On the smoke days he forgets. The breath comes down over the ridge and into the C train where he rides home in his armor, and the armor — just for the length of the smoke — loosens, and he falls asleep against the shoulder of a stranger, a wide tired woman in hospital scrubs going home off the night shift. She wakes when his head lands on her. She looks down at him, this boy working so hard to be a man, gone slack and young and finally unguarded in his sleep, and she does not wake him. She shifts, instead, to take his weight more squarely — the way Térrace takes the weight of the sky, the way the whole community of towers takes the weight of whichever of them has gone dark — and she rides three stops past her own to let him sleep, because she has a son, or had one, or wanted one, the story is hers and she did not tell it to me and I will not invent it. When he wakes he is mortified. He stammers. He begins the apology that boys his age have ready for every occasion of their own need. And she only smiles and says you needed it, baby, and gets off at the next stop, and is gone, and Idris rides the rest of the way home in a state he cannot name, which is the state of having been allowed to lean, and for the rest of the day he is inexplicably, helplessly happy, and does not connect it to the woman, and does not connect it to the tower, and decides, with some alarm, that he is probably coming down with something.

It reaches the woman too, later — for Térrace is fair, the way the whole community is fair, and never gives the joy of leaning to one person without giving it back to the one leaned upon. She climbs her own stairs at the end of the long shift and the long detour, and she leans her own forehead against her own cool window, and lets the bus-roar and the buzzer and the endless fluorescent night drain out of her, and feels the glass take her weight and hold it and not give, and she sleeps standing for a moment against the window the way her body has not let her sleep in months.

It reaches the old men at the domino table on Audubon Avenue, who have leaned on each other for forty years without once saying so, and who on the smoke days play badly because they are too busy being content.

I have wondered whether Térrace is tired. Whether the lean is the posture of a thing that has been standing a very long time and would like, finally, to set the weight down. I asked them — I stood at their base on a smoke evening and put the question up the long rose shaft of them as plainly as I could. And what came back down was not tiredness. It was the warmth, the pleased half-degree, the same as Áveline's but lower and longer, a held note instead of a struck one. I understood it to mean: I am not leaning because I am tired. I am leaning because leaning is the truest thing a standing thing can do, and I am the only one tall enough for everyone to see it, and so I do it for all of you, on purpose, forever. And I understood something else, too, standing there: that Térrace leans south because that is where the others are, that the incline I had read as devotion really was devotion, that a tower who breathes the joy of leaning would of course lean themselves, would of course bow permanently toward their family, would of course refuse the cables that tried to pull them upright and alone. Lean on each other, the tower was saying, four degrees off true over Fort George. It is not a weakness in the structure. It is the structure.

Come down off the ridge with me. The land is falling away to the south and the third of them is waiting, the tall thin one, the one who has been stretching their neck toward the sky for so long that the people below have forgotten the city ever sat still.

III. MIRÓ OF THE LONG NECK

the Stretching Breath · Washington Heights

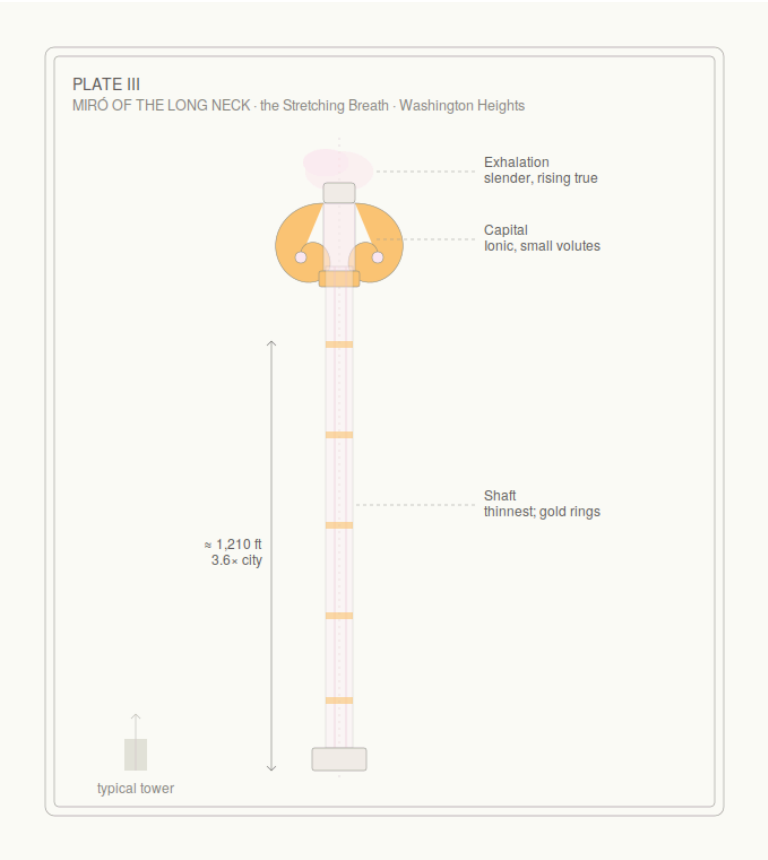


Plate III — architectural elevation

The third tower has been reaching for the sky so long that the people below have forgotten the city was ever meant to sit still.

Miró is the thinnest of them, a single slender Ionic shaft over Washington Heights, pale rose going to almost-white near the top, where the two volutes of their capital curl out small and neat like the ears of something listening. Because they are listening — Miró is the great listener of the community, the thin tower who catches the breath coming down from Áveline and Térrace in the north and passes it carefully south, who hears the whole long conversation move through them all day, vertebra by vertebra. Where Áveline is a basket and Térrace a resting head, Miró is a neck — a long elegant throat of a tower, banded in gold at intervals that the eye reads, helplessly, as the rings of a stretch, going up and up past the point where the rest of the city stops and into the part of the air that belongs only to weather. They are always reaching. The reach is not toward anything. That is what I had to learn about Miró: the reach is the whole of the thing, the reach is not impatience or longing for some height not yet attained, the reach is simply what a body does when it has been folded too long and is finally, gloriously, allowed to unfold.

The joy they breathe is the joy of the stretch after long sitting.

It is one of the oldest joys and one of the most overlooked, because it asks nothing and costs nothing and leaves no story behind it. You have done it ten thousand times. You stand up from the desk, the train, the long meal, the longer meeting, and without deciding to you lift your arms and lengthen your spine and your whole frame says ahhh in a register below hearing, and for one second every cell in you is an inch farther from every other cell than it was, and the day, which had folded you up small, lets you out. Miró breathes that. The long unkinking. The throat of the body opening.

It reaches the seamstresses on St. Nicholas Avenue, who sit bent over their machines from morning, their shoulders curling further forward by the hour, their necks set at the angle the work demands until the angle stops feeling like a choice and starts feeling like their shape. There is a woman among them named Altagracia who has sewn in that posture for thirty years and has the stoop to show for it, the permanent forward fold of the long-seated, and who has stopped believing, somewhere along the way, that her body contains the possibility of any other shape. On the smoke days the breath comes down over the avenue and into the workroom through the propped-open door, and the women rise — all at once, as if a bell had rung that only they can hear — and stand, and arch their backs against the doorframe, and reach their arms over their heads, and look up. And there is Miró, reaching too, eleven hundred feet of agreement, a tower built in the shape of the exact thing their bodies are doing. Altagracia reaches highest of all of them. For one moment in the doorway she is not stooped. For one moment her thirty-year fold opens all the way out and she is as tall as she was at twenty, taller, reaching, unkinked, and she laughs out loud at the surprise of it, at the forgotten feeling of her own full height, and the other women laugh with her, a doorway full of bent women briefly straight, and then they go back in and sit down and fold back up, but they have remembered now, they have felt it, and the remembering is the gift, the remembering is what Miró breathes — not a permanent cure for the stoop, the towers do not work miracles, but the daily restored memory that the body folded was always also a body that could open.

It reaches Beto, who drives a livery cab and has not stood fully upright, it feels to him, since 2009. On a smoke evening he pulls over on Fort Washington with no fare and no reason, and gets out, and stretches in the street, both arms up, fingers spread, in full view of everyone, his spine cracking gloriously back into a line it had forgotten — and a woman walking her dog stretches back at him in solidarity, and they laugh, two strangers unfolding under the long neck of the tower.

It reaches the tower's own neighbors, the pigeons, who do whatever it is pigeons do that looks, from below, like contentment.

Calvino said a city contains its past the way the lines of a hand contain a fortune. Miró makes me think the city contains its postures too — that somewhere in the bend of every street is the memory of a body that bent that way, and somewhere in the rise of every tower is a body's wish to rise. Miró is the wish made permanent. They stand in the north of the island with their small listening volutes and they catch the joy coming down from the first two towers and they pass it on, but they also keep something for the avenue directly below them, the daily reminder to the bent and the folded that they were not always bent, that the stretch is still in them, that no posture is final. I find I cannot stand in

their shadow without lengthening my own spine. Try it. The tower is teaching the whole neighborhood a thing the neighborhood already knew and had let itself forget, which is the only kind of teaching that ever really works.

South again. The land widens. The next of them is loud where Miró is quiet, two voices instead of one, and they finish each other's sentences.

IV. SISKO & SASH

the Twinned Breath · Hamilton Heights

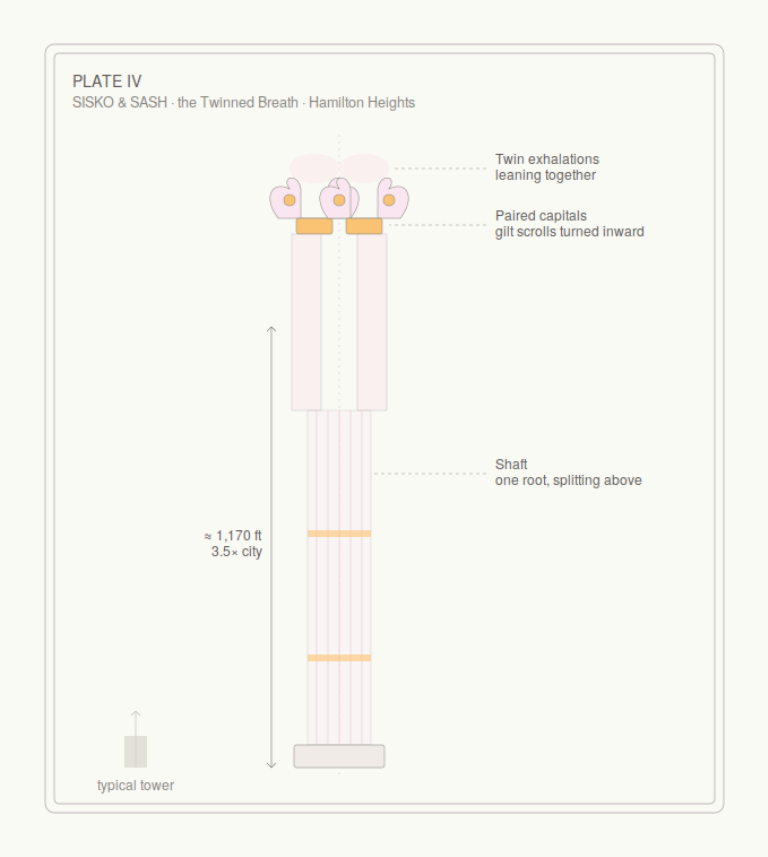


Plate IV — architectural elevation

The fourth tower is two towers, and they will be very hurt if you mistake them for one.

Sisko and Sash stand together over Hamilton Heights, twinned at the root and twinned at the crown, a single rose shaft that splits as it rises into two, each with its own small gilt scroll-work turned inward toward the other, so that their capitals seem always to be in conference. They are the closest of all the towers, in every sense; you cannot draw a plate of one without the other crowding into the frame. I have given up trying. The plate shows them both. They would not have it otherwise. And because they know, better than any of the others, what it is to be permanently completed by someone else, they have taken on a particular role in the community: they are the ones who finish the sentences of any tower that falters. When a breath fails somewhere down the island, when a tower loses the thread of their own joy on a hard gray day, it is Sisko and Sash who reach across the miles and pick up the line, the way you murmur the next word to a friend who has lost it mid-story, so that the faltering tower's exhalation is quietly completed from Hamilton Heights and never has to stand revealed as broken.

What they breathe together is the joy of being finished — of the sentence completed by another mouth.

You have felt it. You begin to say a thing and someone you love says the end of it before you reach it, and instead of stealing the thought they have confirmed it, they have reached into the half-dark of your half-made sentence and found the same word waiting there that you were reaching for, and the two words turn out to be one word, and for a moment the lonely private work of having a mind is not lonely and not private. That is Sisko and Sash. They breathe the overlap. The place where two separate people turn out to share a border.

It reaches Dolores and her sister Pilar, who have not spoken in three years. The fight that started it has worn smooth in both their memories — neither could now tell you, under oath, exactly what was said, only that something was said, by one of them, about the other's marriage or the other's choices or the mother's will, and that the something could not be unsaid, and that three years went by in the specific silence of two people who live close and pass on the street and look away. It is the worst silence there is, the silence between people who know each other completely, because every day of it wastes a fluency that took a lifetime to build. On a smoke afternoon Pilar's phone rings and it is Dolores, and neither of them planned the call, and Dolores cannot afterward say why she dialed, and there is a terrible pause on the line, the three years sitting in it. And then their mother comes up — one of them mentions the mother, it does not matter which — and they begin, at the exact same instant, into the exact same pause, to say the exact same sentence. It is an old family joke about their mother, a thing the two of them have said in unison since they were girls, a reflex older than the fight, and it comes out of both their mouths at once, complete, identical, and they hear themselves doing it, finishing each other's sentence across three years of silence, and the joke lands the way it always landed, and they laugh — the same laugh, they have the same laugh, they have always had the same laugh — and the three years are simply over. Dissolved. You cannot finish someone's sentence and stay estranged from them; the body will not allow it; the fluency, once it fires, burns the silence off in a single instant. They talk for two hours. Neither apologizes, because the joke was the apology, the unison was the apology, the shared border lighting up again was worth more than any words either could have assembled on purpose.

It reaches the two halves of a chess game in St. Nicholas Park, strangers, who play in total silence and understand each other completely.

It reaches every pair of friends walking north who say jinx and mean, underneath the child's word, something enormous: you are in here too. I am not alone in here.

The engineers tell me Sisko and Sash are structurally a single tower with a bifurcated upper third, that to call them two is sentimental, that the split is cosmetic. I tell the engineers that by their own logic every pair of people is structurally a single species with a bifurcated surface, and that the split is the whole miracle, and they go quiet, and we look up together at the two scrolls leaning inward, finishing each other, over Hamilton Heights, and even the engineers do not entirely believe themselves. I have come to think Sisko and Sash are the heart of the community, the demonstration tower, the proof standing in the north of the island that two separate things can share a border so completely that the border becomes the best part of both — which is, when you strip it down, the whole proposition of

every chosen family that ever formed on this island: that you are not one, that you were never meant to be one, that the finishing of your sentence by another mouth is not the loss of your voice but the whole reason you were given one.

The light is full now. Down the slope to the south, where the avenues run straight and wide, the fifth tower waits for evening, because it is the only one that will not breathe until the day begins to let go.

V. VESPER

the Dusk Breath · Morningside

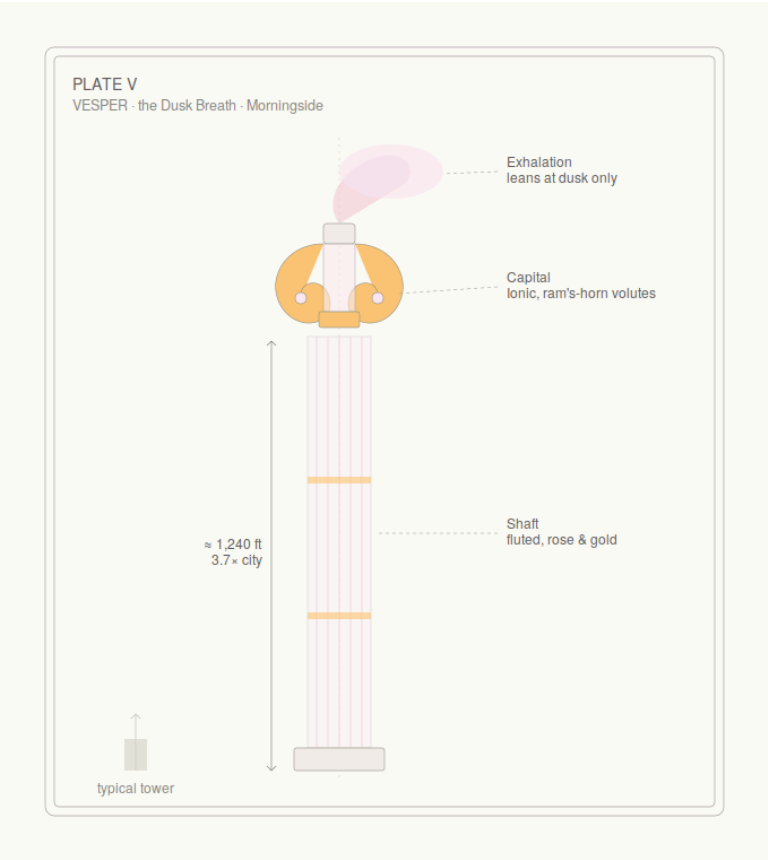


Plate V — architectural elevation

The fifth tower keeps banker's hours in reverse: closed all day, open at dusk, and never once early.

Vesper stands over Morningside with their great ram's-horn volutes curling down on either side of the capital, gold and rose, heavy as a sleeping animal's head, and all through the bright hours they do nothing. No smoke. No warmth in the gilt. The neighborhood that has come to depend on them learns patience, learns to glance up through the long afternoon and see only the still horns against the sky and to think, not yet, not yet. And the other towers know to leave the gap. This was the first thing about the community that frightened me and then taught me the most: when Vesper goes dark all day, the others do not panic, the way I panicked the first time, certain that a tower had died. They understand it is discipline, not distress. Fern reaches their cool shade a little north to cover Morningside through the bright hours; Miró's listening volutes hold the silence gently; and the whole island simply waits with Vesper, the way a good family lets the member who works nights sleep through the noise of the day without once calling them lazy. And then the sun goes down behind the Hudson, and the light turns that particular used-gold color it only turns at the end of a day, and Vesper — slowly, the way a person sighs at the door after the shoes are finally off — begins to breathe.

The joy is the dusk joy of taking off your shoes.

Specifically that. Not rest in general — Quietude breathes rest, far to the south, and breathes it differently — but the exact small ecstasy of the threshold, the moment of coming in, the door shut behind you against the day, the shoes coming off, the feet meeting the floor of your own home, the held armor of being-out-in-the-world set down at last. Vesper breathes the arrival. The transition from the self you are for others to the self you are for no one. It is why they will not breathe in daylight. The joy they carry does not exist in daylight. It only lives at the hinge.

It reaches Mr. Adekanye, who teaches eighth grade and is, from eight to three, a wall of cheerful authority. You have to understand what it costs him, the cheerful authority — what it costs anyone who stands in front of thirty thirteen-year-olds and must be, all day, larger and calmer and more certain than any human being actually is, must absorb the chaos and return order, must never once let them see the tiredness or the doubt or the particular ache of giving so much of yourself to children who will not remember your name. By three o'clock Mr. Adekanye is a costume with a man somewhere inside it. He rides home holding the costume in place — on the bus a student might see him, on the street a parent might stop him — and he climbs the four flights to his apartment still wearing it, still upright, still Mr. Adekanye. And then he opens his own door, and shuts it behind him, and on the smoke evenings, as Vesper begins to breathe over Morningside, he toes off his shoes at the door and lets the costume fall. The sigh he makes is enormous. It comes from somewhere below his feet. It is the sound of a man setting down a weight he has carried since morning, the whole performed self released at the threshold, and his upstairs neighbor — a young woman who has never met him, who knows him only as the sigh that comes up through her floor each evening — has come to listen for it, and finds it, without understanding why, the most reassuring sound in her day. She does not know it is a teacher. She does not know it is exhaustion becoming relief. She knows only that every evening, through her floor, someone arrives home and is released, and that if it can happen for him it can happen for her, and on the smoke evenings she takes off her own shoes when she hears his sigh, in a kind of unwitnessed solidarity, two strangers crossing the same threshold one floor apart.

It reaches the night-shift nurse going the other way — for the threshold works in both directions, and Vesper is fair. She sheds her home-self at her own door at nine p.m. and steps out into the dusk toward her work renewed, her shoes going on instead of off, and the going-on is its own version of the joy, the deliberate assumption of the self that is needed elsewhere, the armor taken up freely because someone on the ward will need her to be larger and calmer and more certain than any human being actually is, and she can do it, she is rested, the threshold has given her back to herself.

It reaches everyone, eventually, who has ever stood in their own doorway with the door shut behind them and felt the day slide off like a coat.

I asked Vesper once why they waited. I stood under them through a whole wasted afternoon to ask it, and got nothing, because of course I got nothing, they do not work in the afternoon. But at dusk the answer came as the smoke came,

slow and gold: because some joys are made of contrast, and you cannot give the joy of coming in to someone who has not been out. Vesper is the most disciplined of all of them. They withhold all day so that what they give at evening will be true. And the community lets them — this is the part I keep returning to — the community covers Morningside through the bright hours and asks Vesper nothing, demands no daylight breath, never once treats the long silence as a failure, because a family that has learned to hold radical joy has also learned that rest is not laziness and that the one who must work at the hinge of the day deserves the whole rest of the day to wait. There is a lesson in this that I am not yet good enough to learn, but I am learning it from the towers, who learned it from people who learned it a long time ago in rooms I was not yet alive to sit in.

Down off Morningside, the land flattens into Harlem, and the sixth tower is already breathing — has been breathing since dawn — the most generous and least private joy on the whole island.

VI. JUBILÉE

the Borrowed-Music Breath · Harlem

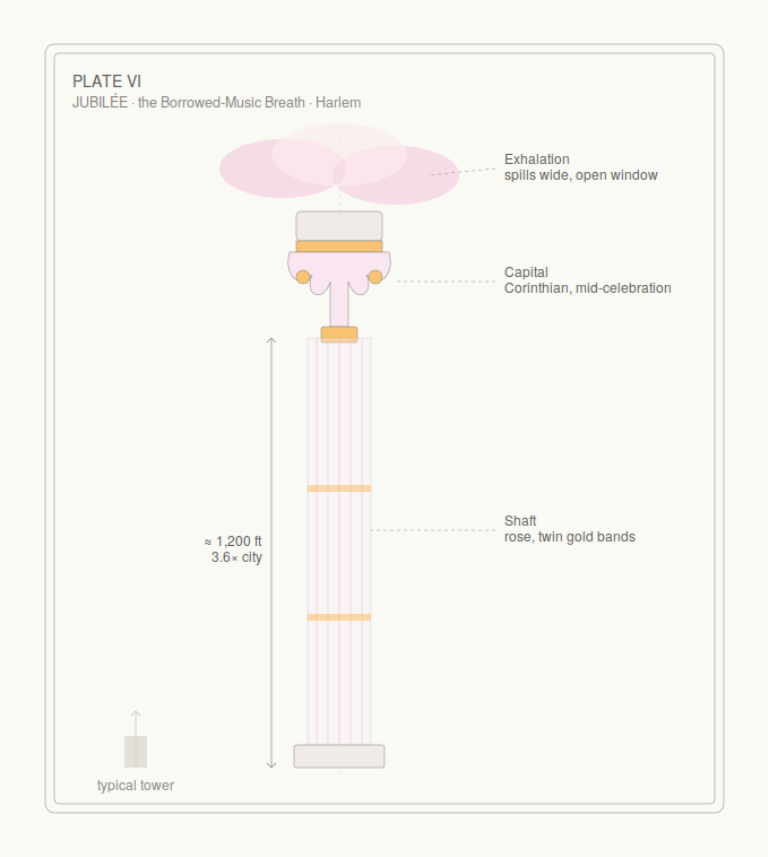


Plate VI — architectural elevation

The sixth tower breathes with the windows open.

Jubilée stands over Harlem in a cream Corinthian crown that billows at the top like the whole capital is mid-celebration, leaves and scrolls tumbling outward, and the smoke does not rise from them so much as spill, generous and wide, settling over the brownstones and the boulevards in a broad warm sheet. Of all the towers Jubilée is the most extroverted, and the most central to the long conversation — they are the switchboard, the one who catches every joy moving down the island and announces it to the rest, somebody's playing a horn on 125th, do you hear it, pass it down. They breathe early and they breathe often and they do not ration. If the other towers are private joys made visible, Jubilée is the public one, the joy that only exists when it is shared, the joy that doubles the instant you hand it to a stranger.

What they breathe is the joy of a stranger's music becoming yours.

You know the moment. A car goes by with its windows down and its bass up and for four seconds you are inside someone else's song; a man on the corner is playing a horn and you catch it half a block away and your walk, without consulting you, falls into its time; someone's grandmother has her

radio on the stoop and the whole street is briefly her living room. The music was not yours. You did not choose it, would not have chosen it, and yet here it is, in your chest, moving your feet, and the not-having-chosen-it is precisely the gift — joy arriving from outside, unearned, through an open window, with someone else's name on it. Jubilée breathes that. The borrowed song. The commons of sound.

It reaches the whole of 125th Street at once, on a good smoke morning, so that for a few minutes a saxophone outside the train station and a gospel rehearsal three doors down and the merengue from the fruit stand and the kid practicing trumpet in a third-floor window all become, impossibly, the same piece of music, and everyone walking through it is briefly an orchestra that does not know it is playing.

It reaches Sefu, newly arrived from very far away, lonely in the particular way of a person who does not yet have a single song in common with the city around him. He has been here four months. He has a room, a job, a route between them, and an emptiness that he cannot describe to the people back home because it would sound like ingratitude — he is safe, he is working, what is there to be sad about — but the emptiness is real and it has a precise shape, and the shape is this: he does not yet know any of the city's songs. The music that everyone around him carries in common, the songs that play in the stores and the cabs and the parties he is not yet invited to, the shared soundtrack that says we are all from here, we all know this one — he does not have it, and not having it makes him feel that he is living behind glass, watching a city sing songs he cannot hear. On a smoke afternoon he is walking his route between the room and the job, behind his glass, and a car passes with the windows down, and four bars of something spill out of it — something he has never heard, something fast and bright with a turn in it that he could not have predicted — and his feet, before his mind can stop them, before his loneliness can object, fall into its time. He catches the rhythm. His body learns it in a single bar, the way bodies do, and he is walking to it now, this song he has never heard, this stranger's music, and he understands, standing at the corner waiting for the light with someone else's joy moving his feet, that the glass has broken, that he has caught a song off the city at last, that the having-caught-it is the whole of belonging — you do not become a person of this place by living here or working here, you become one the moment you catch, off a passing stranger, a song you did not choose and find that your body already knew how to dance to it. He is let in. The city's music is now also his. He goes to the job that afternoon humming a song he could not name, and he is, for the first time in four months, not behind the glass.

It reaches the saxophone player too, who has busked outside the station for eleven years, and who on the smoke days feels the half-block of pedestrians fall into his time, and plays for them as if they were the only audience he ever wanted, which by then they are.

Jubilée troubles my theory of the towers, and I am glad of it. The others breathe joys you could, in principle, feel alone in a room. Jubilée's joy cannot be felt alone. It requires the open window, the passing car, the other person's music. So either Jubilée is the exception that breaks my rule, or — and this is what I have come to believe, standing on 125th Street with someone else's song in my chest — the rule was always wrong, and even the most private of the joys, even

Áveline's lonely sunrise, was always secretly addressed to someone, was always a borrowed music, was always the commons wearing the disguise of solitude. The whole island is one open window. Jubilée is only the most honest about it, which is why they sit at the center of the conversation, catching every song and passing it down — because a community of joy needs one member whose whole gift is the passing-on, the broadcast, the open window through which one person's private music becomes everyone's. Jubilée is that window. The whole island sings through them.

The park begins here. The seventh tower stands across it to the east, where the cooking smells come up from the avenues, and breathes the most appetizing joy of them all.

VII. PIMENTÓ

the Overfed Breath · East Harlem

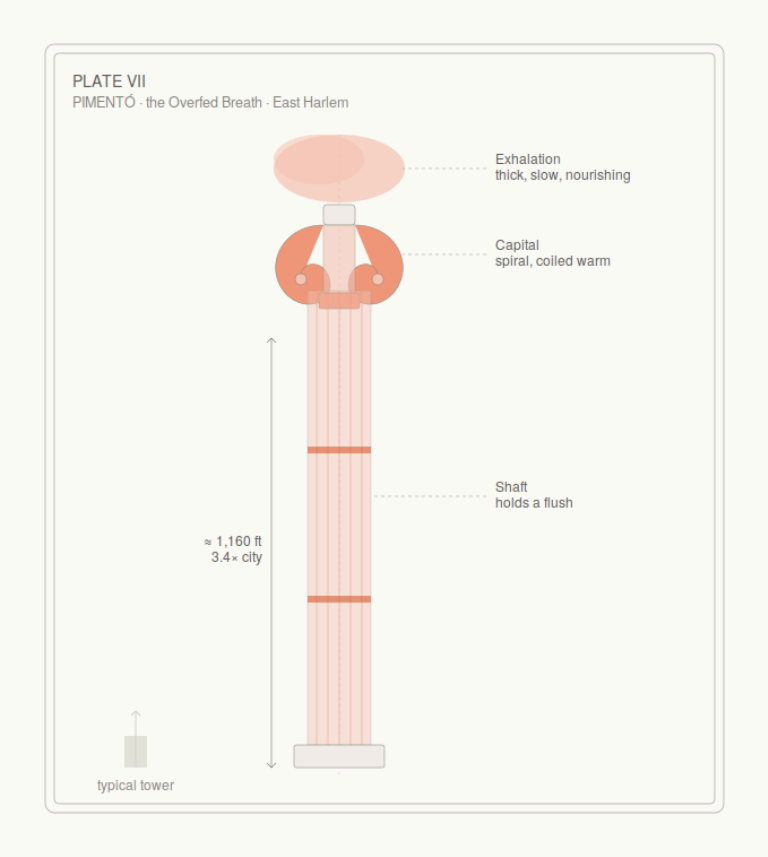


Plate VII — architectural elevation

The seventh tower runs warm, and smells, if you get close enough on the right evening, faintly of someone's kitchen.

Pimentó stands over East Harlem, a rose-toned spiral of a tower, their volutes coiled tight and warm-colored, the whole shaft holding a flush like a pot that has been on low all day. Where Jubilée spills music, Pimentó spills abundance — the smoke comes off them thick and slow and somehow nourishing, and it carries down over the avenues the unmistakable feeling of a kitchen in which someone who loves you is making too much food on purpose. They are the one who feeds the community, in the long conversation; when any tower flags, Pimentó's breath says the same thing a kitchen says, come, sit, there is more than enough, you do not have to have earned it.

The joy is the joy of being fed too generously.

It is a joy with a particular cultural fingerprint and also no borders at all — every grandmother on earth has breathed it into a kitchen. It is the heaped plate. The eat, eat. The second helping you did not ask for and could not finish and were loved through anyway. The host who has cooked for twelve when six are coming because the abundance is the message, the over-provision is the love

made edible, the impossibility of finishing it the entire point. Pimentó breathes the heaped plate. The joy of more than enough, pressed on you by someone for whom your fullness is a personal triumph.

It reaches Doña Esperanza, who cooks on the smoke days as though an army were coming. She is seventy-six and she lives alone now, which is the cruelty the years have arranged for a woman whose entire language of love was the feeding of a full house — the husband gone, the children scattered to other boroughs and other states, the big table that once could not hold all the plates now holding only the mail. She could cook small. Everyone tells her to cook small, to cook for one, to be sensible. She cannot do it. On the smoke days especially she cannot do it; the breath comes down over the avenue and into her kitchen and her hands simply will not measure out a single portion, they reach for the big pot, they double the recipe, they cook as though the scattered children were on their way home and bringing friends. And on the smoke days, somehow, people come — a granddaughter who felt an inexplicable urge to visit, a neighbor who happened to knock, the building's lonely young man from the fourth floor who she has been quietly fattening for a year — and they sit at the big table, and she feeds them past the point of comfort, ándale, hay más, you are too thin, eat, and they leave so full they ache, carrying foil-wrapped surplus down the stairs because she will not let them leave without it. And then she stands in her emptied kitchen, the big pot scraped down, the table littered with the wreckage of people having been fed, and she is in a happiness so complete it frightens her a little, because it is the old happiness, the full-house happiness, the one she thought the years had taken, and she understands — not in words — that as long as her hands reach for the big pot she is not alone, that the cooking-for-an-army is not delusion but invitation, that a kitchen making too much is a kind of prayer and that on the smoke days the prayer is answered.

It reaches the line cook at the lunch counter on 116th, who on the smoke days cannot stop himself adding a little extra to every plate, a few more fries, a heavier hand with the rice, and whose boss would object if the customers were not so visibly, contagiously glad.

It reaches the food pantry on the corner, where the volunteers on smoke mornings find the boxes filling faster than they empty, donations arriving from people who cannot quite say why they bought double this week, and the line moving through with everyone somehow leaving heavier than the arithmetic allows.

There is a version of abundance that is about display, that says look how much I have. Pimentó breathes the other kind, the kind that says look how much I have for you, which is the same sentence turned toward another person and thereby completely transformed. I have eaten at the tables under Pimentó. I have been the one made to ache with fullness. I have tried to refuse the second helping and been overruled by a woman one-third my size, and I have understood, foil-wrapped surplus in hand on the stairs, that I was being told I was loved in the oldest language we have, the one that predates all the others, the one that simply means: here, there is more, take it, I made it for you, I would be hurt if you stopped. It is the language the whole community of towers speaks, in the end — the heaped plate, the open hand, the more-than-enough pressed on you whether or not you earned it — and Pimentó is the one who speaks it most literally, in warmth and the smell of a kitchen, over the avenues of East Harlem, where no one who is hungry on a smoke day stays hungry for long.

The park is wide here, green and breathing on its own account, and the eighth tower stands at its northern edge, the only one of them that has, instead of a name out of music or memory, the name of a part of the body.

VIII. FERN

the Shade Breath · Central Park North

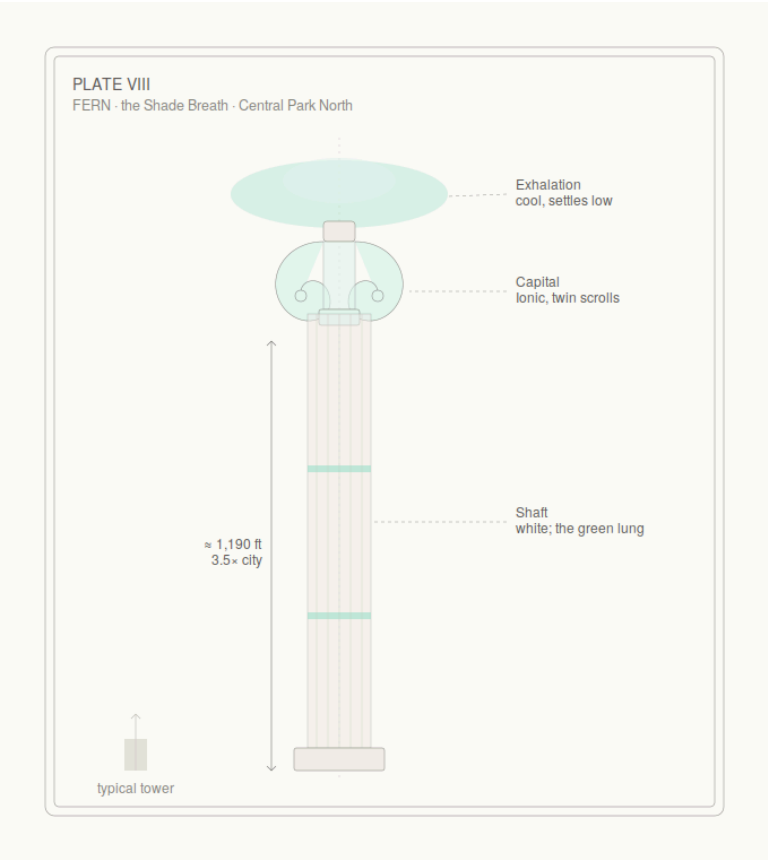


Plate VIII — architectural elevation

The eighth tower is named for a part of the body and breathes like a lung, which is only fair, since the park below them is the city's.

Fern stands at the north edge of Central Park, a white Ionic tower with twin scrolls and a curious elbow-pipe in their upper works that the engineers cannot account for and that I have come to think of as a windpipe. They are the green-breathing one, and in the community they are the one who covers — when Vesper goes dark by day, it is Fern who reaches their cool shade north over Morningside; when a tower to the south is overexposed and faltering, it is Fern's settled shadow that drifts to cover them. Their smoke is faintly cool where the others' is warm, and it does not bloom or spill or trail — it settles, low and broad and shadowing, and where it settles the light goes soft and dappled, as though a great tree had grown instantly overhead.

The joy is the joy of shade you did not know you needed.

The specific relief of stepping, on a too-bright day, under something that takes the glare off — a tree, an awning, the north side of a building, the brim of a hat — and feeling your own face unclench, your eyes stop their squinting, a tightness you had not even registered let go across your forehead.

Fern breathes that. The unasked-for shadow. The mercy of less light. It is a joy you can only feel as a release, which means you cannot feel it until something that was bothering you stops, which means Fern's gift is really the gift of noticing the bother by removing it — the cool hand laid on the hot forehead of the day.

It reaches the chess hustlers and the stroller-pushers and the sun-stunned tourists on the park's north paths, who drift, on smoke afternoons, toward the dappled places without knowing they are drifting, and arrive in the cool, and exhale.

It reaches a woman named Grace who has been, for some weeks, too brightly lit in every sense. I do not know the whole of it and she did not tell me and I will not invent it, but I know the shape of her weeks from the way she sat down: overstimulated, overscheduled, overexposed, a person living under a noon that would not end. You know the state. It is not sadness exactly and not exhaustion exactly; it is the condition of having no shade in your life, no dim cool place to step into, every hour lit and scheduled and demanding, the glare of obligation and visibility and the relentless brightness of being needed turned on you without relief until you forget that dimness was ever an option, until you cannot even feel how much it is hurting because the hurt has become the constant light you see everything by. Grace came into the park on a smoke afternoon because she had twenty minutes between two bright obligations and nowhere else to put them. She sat down on a bench. And Fern was breathing — the cool broad shadow had settled over the north of the park — and Grace sat in it, in the sudden dappled dimness, and felt, for the first time in those weeks, the glare come off her life. Her face unclenched. Her eyes stopped squinting against a light she had not known she was squinting against. And in the dimness, in the mercy of less, in the cool green dark that asked nothing of her and lit nothing up and simply let her be unseen for a moment, she began, quietly, on the bench, to cry — the good kind, the kind that is itself a shade, the kind that comes when a too-bright thing is finally allowed to dim. She did not know why she was crying. She thought perhaps she was just tired. She was not just tired; she was a person who had been denied shade for too long, finally given some, and the body knows what to do with mercy even when the mind has forgotten to ask for it. She sat in Fern's shadow until the crying was done, and then she got up and went to her next bright obligation, but she went carrying a small dim cool place inside her now, a portable shade, the memory of the bench, and it changed the quality of the light for the rest of the day.

It reaches the park, which on smoke days is somehow greener, as though it too had been squinting.

Fern teaches me that not every joy is an addition. Some joys are subtractions — the removal of a glare, a noise, a weight, a heat. We are so trained to think of happiness as more that we forget the deep relief of less. Fern breathes less. Less light, less heat, less of the relentless overexposure of being a person in a bright loud city that never turns itself down. And the less, it turns out, is a kind of more — more shadow, more softness, more of the cool green dark in which a tired thing can finally stop performing its own brightness. It is fitting that Fern is the community's coverer, the one who reaches their shade over whichever tower is too exposed, because shade is exactly what a family is for: a dim cool place to step into when the light of the world has been on you too long, a shadow cast by someone else's body so that yours can rest. I go to Fern when I am overexposed. I sit in the shade they breathe. I recommend it.

Down the west side of the park the avenues begin in earnest, and the ninth tower stands among them, breathing the joy of the half-familiar face.

IX. COLUMBINE

the Recognition Breath · Upper West Side

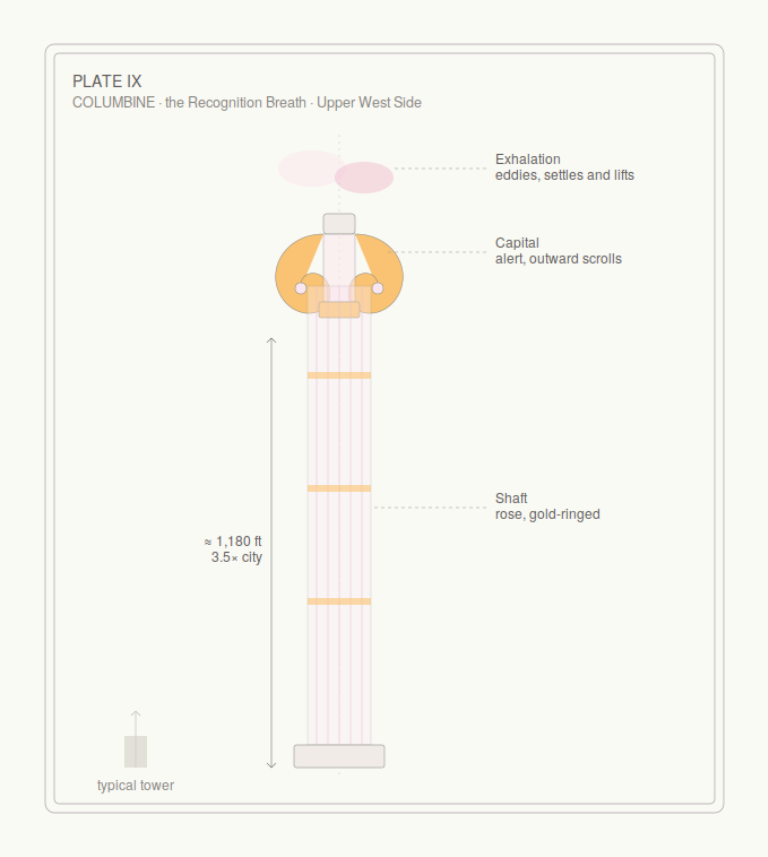


Plate IX — architectural elevation

The ninth tower keeps a list of faces, and breathes when two of them meet.

Columbine stands over the Upper West Side, a rose shaft ringed in gold with pale scrolls that face outward, alert, like a tower perpetually about to say oh — it's you. Their smoke moves in little eddies rather than a stream, settling and lifting, settling and lifting, the way attention moves through a crowd, and where it settles two strangers who are not quite strangers look up at the same moment and place each other. In the long conversation of the towers, Columbine is the keeper of the rolls — the one who remembers which faces belong to which streets, who catches the recognitions Jubilée broadcasts and files them, who could tell you, if you could hear them, the entire web of half-acquaintance that holds a neighborhood together below the level of friendship.

The joy is the joy of recognizing a face on the bus.

The minor, daily, deeply underrated joy of the half-known person — not a friend, not family, but the man from the coffee place seen unexpectedly on the crosstown bus, the woman you always pass walking opposite at exactly 8:14, the dog you know though you have never learned the owner's name. The city is built to make us strangers, millions of us sliding past one another with our eyes down;

Columbine breathes against that. They breathe the small electric click of recognition, the nod, the half-smile, the I know you, we have no idea who the other is and yet we are, in this enormous indifferent place, not strangers, the joy of the human face turning out to be familiar after all.

It reaches the regulars of the M104, who on smoke mornings find themselves nodding to one another, the 8:14 woman and the man with the folded Times and the teenager with the cello, a busful of people who have ridden together for years in silence suddenly and briefly a kind of congregation.

It reaches Walter, who is widowed and lives alone and speaks, some days, to no one. You have to understand the particular architecture of his loneliness, which is not the absence of people — the city is full of people, he passes hundreds a day — but the absence of being known by any of them. His wife knew him. For forty-one years he was a man who was recognized, daily, by another person who carried the whole history of his face, who could see in him the young man and the middle-aged man and the old man all at once. When she died he did not only lose her; he lost the last person to whom he was familiar, and became, overnight, a stranger everywhere, a face on no one's list, a man who could go a week without anyone saying his name. He has been collecting the evidence, the way the lonely do — the cashier who does not look up, the neighbor who does not nod, the proof accumulating that he has become invisible, that he could vanish and the city would not register the gap. On a smoke afternoon he goes to the dry cleaner's, as he does every Thursday, and the woman behind the counter — he has handed her his shirts every week for years, and never once thought she saw him — looks up as he comes in and says, before he can produce his ticket, Mr. Halloran, your shirts are ready. How is your knee? And Walter has to stop. Because she knew his name. Because she remembered his knee — he had mentioned it once, months ago, in passing, the way you say things to people you assume are not listening — and she had kept it, filed it, carried his small complaint around in her memory of him for months, which means he is not invisible, which means he is on someone's list after all, which means that in this enormous indifferent place there is a woman at a dry cleaner's who knows that Mr. Halloran has a bad knee and asks after it. He cannot answer her for a moment. When he does his voice is not steady. He stands on Amsterdam Avenue afterward and has to collect himself, undone not by grief for once but by its opposite, by the discovery that he is still known, that being known did not die with his wife, that the city is not the strangers' country he had convicted it of being but is full, if you look up, of people holding small pieces of you in their memory, asking after your knee.

It reaches the dog, who recognizes everyone, and has always found our surprise at recognition slightly puzzling.

The grid was supposed to make us interchangeable. Numbered streets, identical blocks, a city you could get lost in precisely because every part resembled every other part. Columbine breathes the counter-spell. Under Columbine the interchangeable city fills up with particular faces, and the particular faces turn out to know each other, and the anonymity that the grid promised — that some of us came here for — is revealed as the thin thing it always was. You are not anonymous here. Columbine has your face on their list. So does the woman at the dry cleaner's. So, it turns out, does almost everyone, if the smoke comes down and you happen to look up. And this, I have come to think, is the

most quietly radical thing the community of towers does — not the grand joys, the crowd and the sunrise and the gathered sea-breath, but this small daily insistence that we are known, that we are on each other's lists, that no one walking these numbered streets is as much a stranger as the streets were designed to make them. A family is, at bottom, the people who have your face on their list. Columbine is breathing us all onto each other's.

Across the park, on the east side, the tenth tower stands among the awnings and the doormen, and breathes the most pampered joy on the island.

X. DOWAGER PEARL

the Doted-On Breath · Upper East Side

Plate X — architectural elevation

The tenth tower wears pearls, or the next best thing, and breathes the joy of being looked after.

Dowager Pearl stands over the Upper East Side in pearl-pink rolled volutes wrapped in delicate floral bands, the most ornamented of all the capitals, a tower that has clearly been maintained, fussed over, kept. Their smoke is fine and soft, almost a powder, and it settles over the side streets with their awnings and their doormen and their small expensive dogs, and where it settles people find themselves, briefly, taken care of. Among the towers, Dowager Pearl is the elder who frets — the one always checking whether the others have what they need, whether Vesper is resting properly, whether the younger curves of smoke to the south are warm enough, the tower whose particular contribution to the family is the worry that is really love wearing its working clothes.

The joy is the joy of being doted on without having asked.

The doorman who remembers your name and your packages. The waiter who brings the thing before you order it. The mother — anyone's mother — who has laid out the towel and turned down the bed and put the glass of water on the nightstand, all the small invisible labors of care that arrive without request and announce that someone has been thinking of your comfort while you were not

thinking of it at all. Dowager Pearl breathes the received care. The being-tended. The luxury, available in principle to anyone and hoarded in practice by a few, of having one's small needs anticipated by another person who finds in the anticipating their own quiet joy.

It reaches Mrs. Ashford-Klein, who has everything and is doted on constantly and has stopped, over the doted-on decades, being able to feel it. This is the trap of her particular life, and Dowager Pearl understands it precisely: that care, when it is constant and purchased and expected, stops registering as care at all, becomes merely the temperature of the air she moves through, the doormen and the housekeepers and the drivers all anticipating her needs so reliably that she has not consciously felt looked-after in years, has come to take the anticipation as her due the way one takes the floor for granted until it gives way. She is not a cruel woman. She is an unfeeling one, in the specific sense that the feeling has been worn smooth by repetition, the way a coin's face wears off in circulation. On a smoke morning her housekeeper, Marisol, brings her coffee — exactly as she likes it, as always, the right cup, the right warmth, the right amount of milk stirred in the right way — and sets it down, as always, and on this morning, for no reason Mrs. Ashford-Klein could name, the smoke having come down fine as powder over the side street, she feels it. She feels the care in the cup. She sees, suddenly, all at once, the years of mornings, the thousands of cups, each one prepared exactly right by a woman who has studied her preferences the way you study someone you are paid to study but also, it turns out, someone you have come to know — and she feels the weight of all that anticipation, all that daily tending she had stopped registering, and she looks up at Marisol, really looks at her, and says thank you in a voice that surprises them both, because it is not the automatic thank-you of the served to the serving but the real one, the one that means I see what you do for me, I have seen it all along without seeing it, thank you. And Marisol, who has set down ten thousand cups to no particular notice, goes still for a moment, because she has been seen.

It reaches Marisol more, and better, because the tower is fair — fair in the way the whole community insists on being fair, never giving the joy of being-tended to the one who is always tended without giving it back, redoubled, to the one who does the tending. She goes home on the smoke evening, tired in the specific way of a person whose job is care, and her own daughter has, unasked, made the dinner and laid the table and put a glass of water at her mother's place. Marisol stands in the doorway of her own kitchen. She who dotes on others for a living, who anticipates needs all day for a wage, is for once on the receiving end of the anticipation, is tended by a child who has been watching her mother tend others and has learned, unprompted, to turn it back toward her — and Marisol sits down to a meal she did not cook, at a table she did not set, in a state close to disbelief, doted on without having asked, and understands at last from the inside the thing she has been giving Mrs. Ashford-Klein for years.

It reaches the small expensive dogs, who have never known anything else, and accept the smoke as their due.

Dowager Pearl is the tower I most distrusted and have come, slowly, to love. I distrusted them because the joy they breathe has been, historically, for sale — care concentrated where the money is, the doting purchased rather than freely

given, a luxury fenced off on the avenue where the awnings are. But the tower does not honor the fence. The tower breathes on Marisol's daughter as readily as on Mrs. Ashford-Klein, more readily, because the daughter's care is freely given and the freely given care is the realer thing. The tower breathes the care, not the cash. And in doing so, Dowager Pearl quietly redistributes, on the smoke days, the one luxury that should never have been a luxury — the simple experience of being looked after by someone glad to do it — back across the whole indiscriminate avenue, to everyone, dog included. It is what an elder does in a good family: frets over everyone equally, tends without ranking, and makes sure that the ones who spend themselves caring for others are themselves, sometimes, cared for.

The avenues run south now toward the center of everything. The eleventh tower stands where the great hall of music is, and breathes a joy you can only feel out loud.

XI. ARIA

the Resonant Breath · Lincoln Square

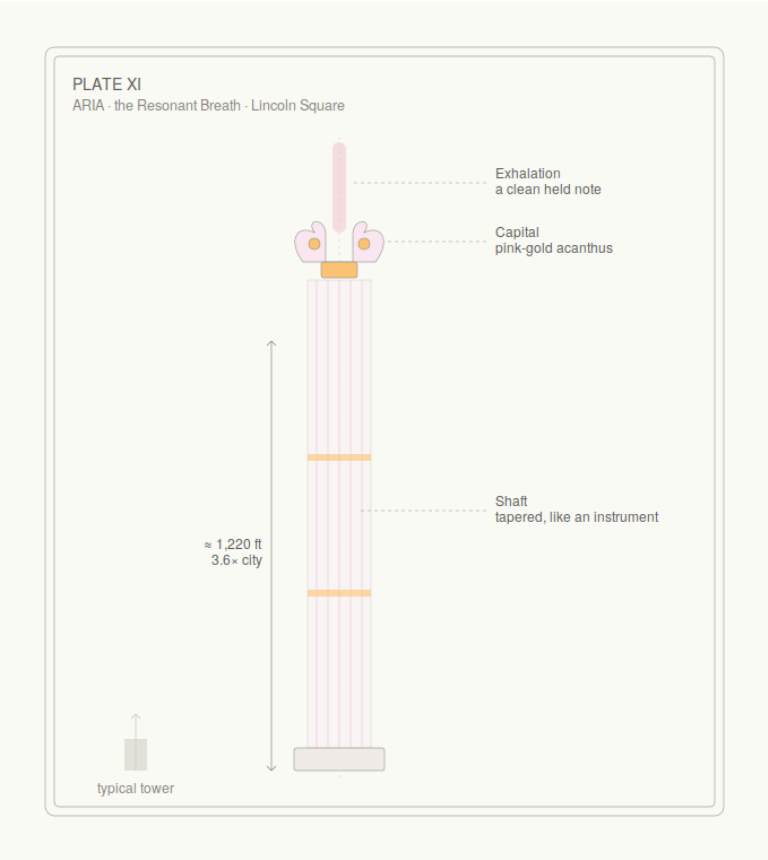


Plate XI — architectural elevation

The eleventh tower is built like a throat and breathes the joy of the room that sings back.

Aria stands over Lincoln Square in a capital of pink-and-gold acanthus, their plume of smoke rising in a clean strong column like a held note, and there is something in the proportions of them — the flare of the capital, the taper of the shaft — that makes the whole tower read as an instrument, a pipe in some unimaginable organ, waiting to sound. In the conversation of the towers, Aria is the one whose breath the others can hear most clearly, the resonant one, the tower whose joy carries the farthest along the smoke — so that when a tower to the north or south falters, it is often Aria's resonance that reaches them first, the held note that says I can hear you, sing, the room will catch it.

The joy is the joy of singing where the acoustics surprise you.

The specific delight of opening your mouth in a stairwell, a tiled bathroom, a stone underpass, a great hall — and finding that the room is generous, that it takes your ordinary voice and hands it back enlarged, resonant, better than you are, so that for a few notes you sound the way you have always secretly believed you might sound. Aria breathes that. The room that flatters. The voice met

and amplified by the space around it. It is a joy about being answered — you sing, and the architecture sings back, and you are, briefly, a duet with the world.

It reaches the shower-singers of the whole West Sixties, who on smoke mornings find their bathrooms unaccountably cathedral-like, and let loose.

It reaches a boy named Tomas who has been told, by a careless teacher, that he cannot sing. You know how this happens, how small the moment is and how total the damage: he was nine, the class was learning a song, the teacher — tired, not cruel, only careless, which is its own kind of cruel — stopped the room and said not you, Tomas, just mouth the words, and Tomas mouthed the words, that day and every day after, for years, because a person in authority had told him that the sound he made was the wrong sound, the sound that spoiled things, the sound to be kept inside. He is fourteen now and he does not sing. He does not sing in the shower, does not sing along to anything, has built around the wound a whole architecture of silence so habitual he no longer feels it as a wound, only as a fact: he is someone who cannot sing, who was told so, who believed it. On a smoke afternoon he is walking through a tiled subway passage, alone, the long echoing kind, and the breath has come down, Aria is breathing over Lincoln Square and the resonance carries, and Tomas — for no reason, because the passage is empty, because something in the cool tiled air invites it — hums. Just a few notes, under his breath, the smallest possible test. And the passage takes the hum and hands it back to him round and warm and good, enlarged by the tile, the way a generous room enlarges any voice, and Tomas stops walking. He has not heard his own voice sound like that — like something worth hearing — since before he was nine. He tries a real note. The passage gives him back a real note, better than he sent it, resonant, full, the voice of someone who can, in fact, sing. He tries another. He stands there in the path of hurrying strangers, a boy in an underpass discovering that the careless teacher was wrong, that the room sings back, that he was never the one who spoiled things — and in ninety seconds, in a tiled passage under Lincoln Square, he begins to undo five years of silence, because the architecture answered him, because something was generous to his voice at last.

It reaches the great hall itself, where on smoke nights the singers report that the room is with them in a way they cannot explain to the engineers, who check the acoustics and find them, maddeningly, unchanged.

Aria makes me think the whole island is an instrument and we have only been told, by careless teachers, that we cannot play it. The room that sings back was always there. The generous acoustic, the space that takes your voice and improves it — that is not rare, it is everywhere, in every stairwell and underpass and tiled hall, waiting. We just stop singing. We are shamed out of it young and we carry the silence around like Idris carries his refusal to lean, like Tomas carries his teacher's four careless words. Aria breathes the silence away. Under Aria, the boy sings in the subway. And the community amplifies it — Aria's resonance is the towers' way of saying to every silenced voice on the island that there is a room somewhere generous enough to answer you, that you were never the wrong sound, that you should sing. That is the whole of it. That is enough.

The center of the island now, the dense bright middle, where the towers stand thickest. The twelfth stands over the west side of midtown and breathes precisely at noon.

XII. MERIDIAN

the Noon Breath · Midtown West

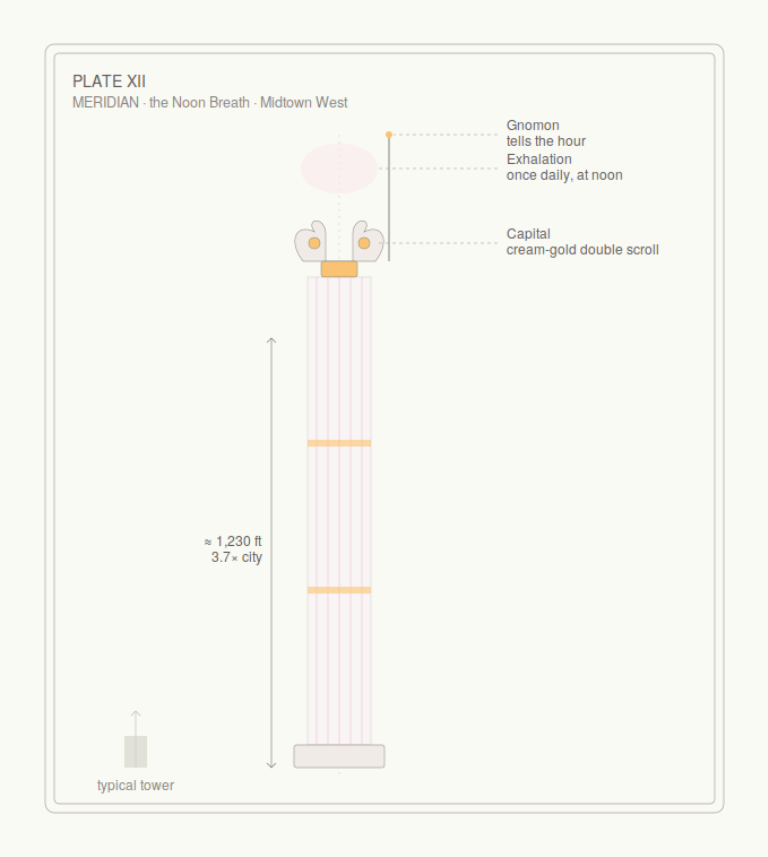


Plate XII — architectural elevation

The twelfth tower tells time, and breathes only once a day, exactly when the sun is highest.

Meridian stands over the west side of midtown, a cream-and-gold double scroll with a slender antenna rising beside them like the gnomon of a sundial, and where Vesper waits for dusk Meridian waits for noon — the true noon, the solar one, the instant the sun crosses the meridian line the tower is named for. The rest of the day they are silent. But at noon, in the thick of the working city, when the streets below are at their most crowded and most hurried and most forgetful, Meridian breathes a single great exhalation, and it comes down over the lunch-hour crowds, and the crowds, mid-stride, mid-sandwich, mid-everything, remember. In the community, Meridian is the timekeeper, the one who calls the hour for all of them — the towers take their noon from Meridian the way a household takes its rhythm from the one member who always knows what time it is.

The joy is the noon joy of recovering a name you had lost.

The name that was on the tip of your tongue for days. The word, the title, the face's name, the thing that sat just behind a door in your mind that would not open — and then, unbidden, in the middle of doing something else entirely, the door swings wide and there it is, retrieved, complete, Hofmann,

her name was Mrs. Hofmann, and the small triumphant click of the mind completing itself, the relief out of all proportion to the stakes. Meridian breathes the retrieval. The lost thing surfacing. The proof, delivered daily at noon, that nothing in you is truly gone, only mislaid.

It reaches the entire lunch crowd of the West Forties at once, ten thousand people who all, at 11:58 by the clock but noon by the sun, suddenly recover ten thousand separate lost names, so that for a moment the whole district is full of people stopping on the sidewalk with a small private aha, snapping their fingers, saying that's it to no one.

It reaches Priya, who has been unable for a week to recall the name of the song her father used to sing. This is a heavier loss than it sounds, and Meridian knows the weight of it precisely. Her father is gone. He has been gone a year, and Priya has been doing the thing the grieving do, which is to inventory what remains — the photographs, the recordings, the smell that is fading from his sweater, and the songs, especially the songs, the ones he sang in the kitchen in the language she is slowly losing, because each one she can still summon is a door back to him and each one she forgets is a second small death, a piece of him going where he has gone. And there is one song, the one she most wants, the one he sang most often, and for a week she has been unable to retrieve its name, has felt it just behind the door, has lain awake reaching for it, and the reaching has only pushed it further off, and she has begun to fear that this one is lost for good, that she will never again be able to call it up, that her father is that much more gone. On a smoke day she is standing at a halal cart on Forty-Sixth Street, a fork halfway to her mouth, thinking of nothing, having given up the reaching — and at noon, as Meridian breathes, the door swings open, and the name is simply there, complete, the way it always swings open the moment you stop reaching, and the name brings the song, and the song brings the kitchen, and the kitchen brings her father, alive, singing, the whole of him arriving at once through the open door of a single recovered name. She has to step out of the line. She stands on the sidewalk with her food going cold and her father restored to her, weeping at a halal cart at noon, and it is not grief, or it is grief's other face, the one that looks exactly like joy: she has him back. The song is not lost. Nothing in her is truly gone, only mislaid, and Meridian breathes at noon to prove it, daily, to everyone, but today especially to Priya, who needed the proof most.

It reaches the half-finished crossword on every break-room table, completed in a rush at noon by people who could swear the answers were not there an hour ago.

Meridian is the most punctual of the towers and, I think, the most reassuring. We live in fear of losing things from our minds — names first, then more, then the faces and the songs and the people the names belonged to. Meridian breathes against that fear, daily, at the hour of fullest light. The lost name comes back. Not because you reached for it — you had stopped reaching, that is why it came — but because the tower breathed, and the sun was high, and the door that seemed locked turned out only to have been waiting for noon. I take more comfort in Meridian than I can quite justify. Whatever you think you have lost from yourself, Meridian suggests, is mislaid, not gone — and the community keeps the noon faithfully, every tower taking the hour from the timekeeper, because a family's deepest work is the keeping of what its members are afraid of losing. Stand in midtown at noon and see if it does not come back.

Across the center of the island, on the east side, the thirteenth tower gleams, the most golden of them all, and breathes the joy of unexpected money.

XIII. GILT

the Found-Money Breath · Midtown East

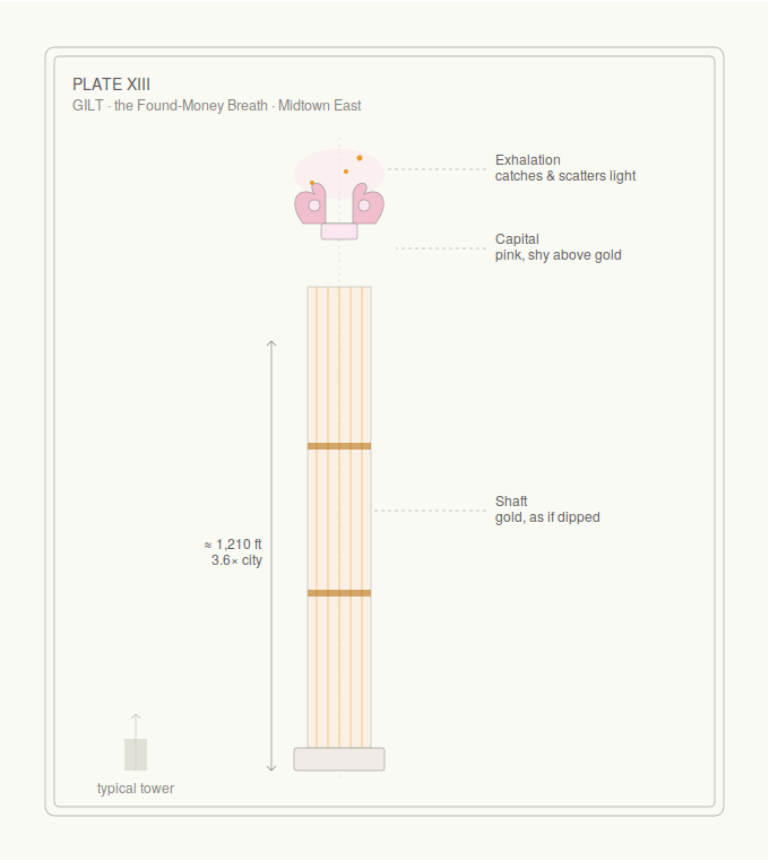


Plate XIII — architectural elevation

The thirteenth tower is the brightest, and breathes the cheapest, most universal windfall there is.

Gilt stands over the east side of midtown on a tall gold fluted shaft — the most nakedly golden of all of them, a column that looks, in full sun, as though it had been dipped — crowned with a pink capital that seems almost embarrassed by the shaft's wealth below it. Their smoke catches the light and throws it around, little glints and sparkles, and where it comes down people find, in pockets and old coats and the backs of drawers, small unexpected sums. Gilt is the most self-conscious member of the community, the one who knows their gift is the most easily misunderstood, and who therefore is most careful — the others tease Gilt, gently, along the smoke, for fretting so much about being mistaken for a tower that breathes mere wealth, when everyone in the family knows that what Gilt actually breathes is the wink underneath the money, the feeling of being thought of, which is not wealth at all.

The joy is the joy of found money.

The twenty in the winter coat you had forgotten. The coin in the gutter, heads up. The refund you did not expect, the overpayment returned, the we owe you a credit, the bill that came in lower than

feared. It is never very much. That is the genius of the joy: it is never an amount that changes your life, it is always exactly an amount that delights you, a sum small enough to be pure gift, untainted by consequence, the universe handing you a few dollars for no reason with a wink. Gilt breathes the windfall. The pleasant surprise of the ledger tipping, briefly, gently, in your favor.

It reaches the whole rush-hour crowd of Lexington Avenue, who on smoke mornings discover MetroCards with one more ride than they remembered, vending machines that give back an extra quarter, jacket pockets seeded with forgotten cash.

It reaches Nadia, a student, very poor that month in the specific grinding way of the young and overextended. You know the arithmetic of that kind of poverty, how it colonizes the mind — the constant background computation, the dollars counted and recounted, the dread of the small unexpected expense that the budget has no slack to absorb, the way being poor is not only the lack of money but the lack of any margin, any cushion, any sense that fortune might ever tip your way rather than against it. Nadia is in the thick of that month. She has done the math too many times; it does not come out; she has the particular exhaustion of a person who has been bracing, for weeks, against the next thing to go wrong. On a smoke afternoon she is in the library, not studying, just sitting with a borrowed book she cannot afford to highlight, and she opens it past where she had been, and folded into the gutter of page two hundred and something is a twenty-dollar bill. Old. Soft with age. Left there years ago by some previous reader as a bookmark, or a hiding place, or an accident, and forgotten, and carried through the years in the closed book until it fell open in Nadia's hands on the exact afternoon she needed it. And she sits there holding it, and it is twenty dollars, which is not nothing to her and is also not the point — the point is the wink, the point is that the universe, which she had convicted of being rigged against her, reached into a book and handed her a small unlooked-for gift, the point is the sensation she had forgotten was available to her, the sensation of being thought of by fortune, of the ledger tipping for once, gently, in her favor. She does not spend it for three days. She carries it around, the soft old twenty, not because of what it can buy but because of what it means: that she is not, after all, only braced against the next bad thing; that good things can also fall open in your hands; that someone, even a stranger years dead to her, even the blind accident of a forgotten bookmark, reached toward her across time on the day she needed reaching toward.

It reaches even the rich, who feel it least, because a windfall is only a windfall against a background of want, and Gilt's gift, like all the truest gifts, falls most warmly on those with the least.

I worried about Gilt. Of all the joys, money is the one we have most thoroughly corrupted, the one most likely to curdle, and I did not see how a tower could breathe it cleanly. But Gilt is careful — careful the way a person is careful who knows they are easily misunderstood. Gilt never breathes a sum that matters. Gilt breathes only the small clean windfall, the few dollars that cannot buy anything but can, somehow, deliver the one thing money is supposed to deliver and almost never does — the sensation of being, for one moment, looked after by fortune. It is the feeling under the money that Gilt is really breathing. The wink. The sense that you were thought of. Strip the wealth away and that is what is left, and that is what comes down, glinting, over Lexington Avenue, into the pockets of the people who need the

wink the most. The community knows this about Gilt, and protects it — never lets Gilt be reduced to the gold of their shaft, always hears, in Gilt's bright breath, the tenderness the gold is only the wrapping for.

Just south of the bright center, the fourteenth tower stands in a quieter pocket of the city and breathes the smallest, gentlest joy of all.

INTERLUDE

The Long Conversation (how the towers speak)

I should have told you sooner that they talk to each other. I held it back because I did not believe it myself for a long time, and because it is the part of the book most likely to lose me the engineers entirely, and because — if I am honest, and the towers have taught me to be — I was protecting something. The conversation of the towers is a private thing, the way the conversations of any close community are private, and I had to be given permission before I could write it down. I have been given permission. So.

They talk along the smoke.

Not in words — I have said all along that they have no voices, and this remains true — but in the way the breath of one passes the breath of another, high up, where the exhalations cross. Stand at the right place on a smoke morning and look up and you will see it: Áveline's column up north bending a little toward Térrace's slant, Térrace's slant trailing down toward Miró's reach, the whole long row of them passing the breath south like a bucket line, like a phone tree, like the old networks of people who learned to pass word along a chain because no single one of them could be trusted to the official channels. The smoke is the channel. The joy is the message. Something good is happening on 125th Street, Jubilée breathes, and Columbine catches it and passes it down, yes, and a face was just recognized on the M104, and Meridian adds it to the noon dispatch, and by the time the word reaches Omega at the Battery it is not one joy but the whole island's joy, gathered, the way a story gets richer each time it is told down a long table of people who love each other.

This is the thing I most want you to understand, the thing that took me longest and that I now believe is the truest thing in the book: the towers are not twenty-three monuments. They are a community.

They know each other. They check on each other. When Vesper goes dark all day — which alarmed me terribly the first time, before I understood it was only their discipline, their waiting for dusk — the others know it is not distress, and they hold Vesper's stretch of the island gently in the meantime, Fern's shade reaching a little south, Aria's resonance carrying a little north, covering the gap the way a family covers for the one who needs to rest. When Riot goes quiet after a long loud night — and even Riot must rest, the loudest joy is the most tiring to breathe — the others breathe a little louder to fill the silence, so that no neighborhood is ever left without its weather. They do not compete. I had assumed, at first, in my held-breath way, that they must — that the tower with the grandest joy must outrank the tower with the smallest, that Omega at the bottom in their four-times height must lord it over modest Quietude in Murray Hill. They do not. There is no ranking. Quietude's held door is spoken along the smoke with exactly the reverence given Omega's gathered sea-breath, because the community of the towers learned, long before I came to write them down, the thing that every real community learns: that the smallest member's joy is not a smaller joy. It is the whole joy, arriving through a smaller door.

I have watched them take care of their own.

I have watched the older towers — Delancey most of all, the Tenement Saint, who remembers when there were fewer of them — keep a kind of watch over the younger curves of smoke, the towers whose neighborhoods are still learning what they are. I have watched the twins, Sisko and Sash, who finish each other's sentences, lend that finishing to a tower across the island who has lost the thread of their own joy on a hard gray day, so that the lost tower's breath, faltering, is quietly completed from miles away, the way a friend picks up the line of a song you have forgotten you were singing. I have watched the whole island, on the rare terrible mornings when one of them cannot breathe at all — and it happens, even to towers, even to the most radiant of us; there are mornings the joy will not come — I have watched the other twenty-two lean their breath toward the silent one, all of them, north and south, bending their columns inward across the miles until the dark tower stands inside a kind of held embrace of smoke, and is not asked to breathe, and is not hurried, and is simply surrounded, and kept, until the morning the breath returns on its own. It always returns. The community makes sure of it. No tower breathes alone, and so no tower stays dark.

If this sounds familiar to you — if you have ever been part of a group of people who built, out of a city that was not built for you, a chosen family that passes word along its own channels and covers for the one who needs to rest and ranks no one and surrounds the dark ones until their light comes back — then you already understand the towers better than the engineers ever will, and you do not need me to draw you the diagram.

Because that is what they are. I will say it plainly, here, in the middle of the book, where the plain things go. The towers are a community of radical joy in a city that spent its whole life being taught to keep its joy small and private and apologetic — and they are not the first such community on this island, and they know it, and they breathe in the lineage of all the others. There have always been people here who did for each other exactly what the towers do: who built chosen families when the given ones failed them, who passed word and warning and joy along their own networks, who covered for each other and ranked no one and surrounded their grieving and their sick and their frightened with a held embrace until the light came back. The towers learned the conversation from them. I am sure of it. The curving columns over the rooftops are only the largest and most visible members of a community that has been breathing radical joy into this island, quietly, along its own channels, in defiance of every instruction to be smaller — for a very long time, in ballrooms and back rooms and church basements and chosen-family kitchens and bars with the windows painted over and parades that started as riots and riots that became parades.

The towers are the new ones. They stand where they stand, twenty-three of them, north to south, because the ones who came before showed them how — how to find each other, how to pass the breath, how to make of a hostile grid a community, how to be, out loud and eleven hundred feet tall and gold and rose and unmistakably, gloriously neither one thing nor the other, exactly and only what they are.

They talk to each other along the smoke. They take care of their own. They are a family that chose itself.

Now you know the secret of the book, and we can go on, and you will read the rest of the towers differently — not as twenty-three solitary wonders, but as a community, holding each other up across the miles, passing the joy down the long table, north to south, so that none of them, and none of us, ever has to breathe alone.

THE TOWERS, IN THEIR OWN CONVERSATION

(a thing I overheard, or believe I did, one smoke evening, and have set down as dialogue because there is no other way to set it down)

Áveline, from the north, at first light: I am awake. Is everyone awake?

Térrace, leaning: I never fully sleep. I am holding the ridge. Go back to your sunrise, I have the morning.

Miró, stretching: I am up, I am up, I am unfolding, give me a moment, I have been folded all night —

Sisko: — give them a moment —

Sash: — they have been folded all night.

Vesper, silent.

Jubilée, with the windows open: Vesper's quiet again. Everyone breathe a little wider, cover the Heights till dusk. Somebody's playing a horn on 125th, do you hear it? Pass it down.

Columbine: I hear it. Two strangers just recognized each other on the bus. Passing it down.

Pimentó, warm: I'm making too much again. There's extra. There's always extra. Send anyone hungry my way.

Fern, cool: I've got the glare off the park. Grace is on the bench. She's crying the good kind. Leave her be, I've got her.

Dowager Pearl: Marisol's daughter made the dinner. Did everyone catch that? The care came back around. Mark it.

Meridian, at noon, precisely: It is noon. Returning all lost names now. Priya's father's song. Stand by. — Returned.

Gilt: Twenty dollars in a library book for Nadia. The wink is delivered.

Quietude, softly: A door was held on Murray Hill. The young man waited. Mr. Sokolov has forgiven the century. It was very small. I am very proud.

Aria: The boy sang in the subway. The room sang back. The careless teacher is overruled.

Proud Mary, lit: Devon was seen. A stranger's whole face opened. Devon is at the rail. We hold Devon now, all of us, gently.

All the towers, leaning their smoke toward Chelsea: We hold Devon now.

Sibyl, on the wedge: Marcus found the one he needed to apologize to. The streets crossed at the right angle. You're welcome.

Locket, holding something close: Yusuf knows his sister's good news and may not tell. Let him keep it. The keeping is the gift. Don't spoil it.

Fig, lazing: Pat stayed three hours at the café. The guilt lifted around hour two. Nobody rush Pat.

Riot, surging: HALIMA GOT SWEPT INTO THE STREET. SHE FOUND THE SELF SHE FORGOT. SHE'S ONE BODY WITH TEN THOUSAND STRANGERS AND SHE'S NOT EVEN MAD —

Pomme, sweet: Mr. Petrosyan gave away half the shop. Smaller profit. Bigger man. The thirteenth roll for everyone today.

Delancey, old and patient: Rosa was remembered. The boy at the bodega knew her young self. The world inside her was witnessed. — Children, I have watched a great many mornings. This is a good one. Keep breathing.

Glass-and-Milk, clear: The light came clean through Jun's window. The grief set itself down for one morning. Just the light. Just enough.

Omega and the Harbor Mother, from the very bottom, gathering it all: We have it. We have all of it. Áveline's sunrise and Quietude's door and Rosa's witnessed life and Jun's clean light and every joy between, the whole bright sentence, north to south. We are breathing it out now, over the Narrows, to the ships, to the sea, to whoever is arriving, to whoever is leaving. — Thank you, family. Thank you for the long table. Breathe it out. Let it go. Here it comes again tomorrow.

Áveline, from the north, at first light: I am awake. Is everyone awake?

And so on, and so on, north to south and back again, forever, the long conversation of the towers, who are a community, who take care of their own, who pass the joy down the table and never let one of their own breathe alone — in the lineage of every chosen family that ever built radical joy on this island out of a city that told them not to.

XIV. QUIETUDE

the Courtesy Breath · Murray Hill

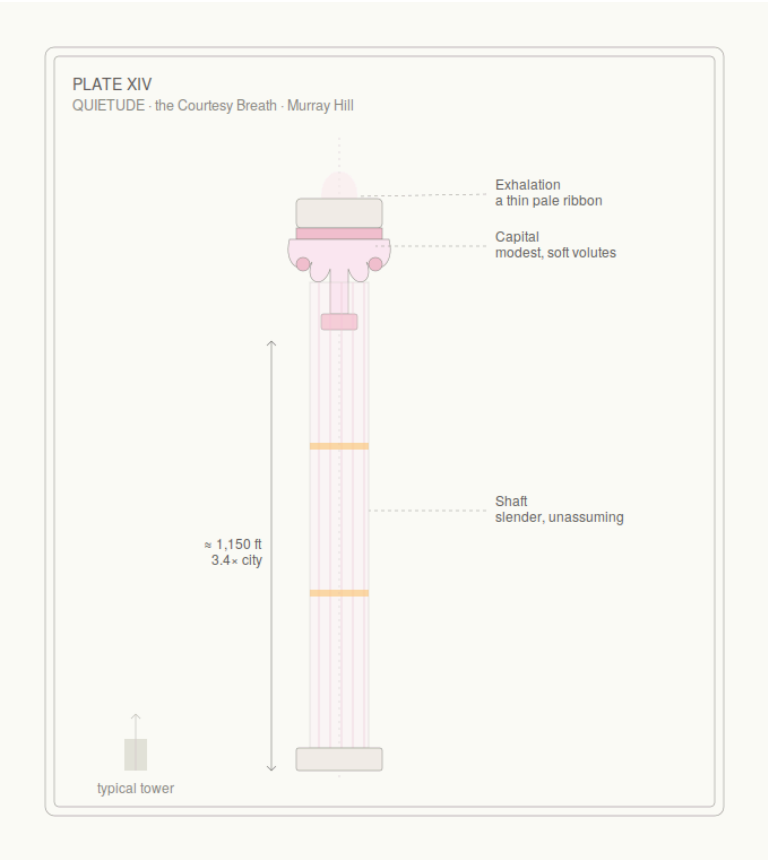


Plate XIV — architectural elevation

The fourteenth tower is the gentlest, and breathes the smallest joy I have been able to find on the entire island, which is also, I have come to think, the most important.

Quietude stands over Murray Hill in a pale Corinthian capital with soft pink volutes, modest beside their flashier neighbors, a tower that does not seem to want to be looked at. Their smoke is the lightest of all — a thin pale ribbon, easy to miss — and it does not announce itself, it simply drifts down over the quiet residential blocks and does its small work and asks for no notice. In the community of the towers, Quietude is the one who never raises their voice in the long conversation, who passes the smallest joys down the line and insists they be honored equally, who reminded the whole family — once, in a way the others have never forgotten — that the held door matters exactly as much as the gathered sea-breath, and shamed no one in the saying of it, because shaming is not in their nature.

The joy is the joy of the held door — of the small courtesy, given and received.

The door held for the stranger whose hands are full. The seat offered. The after you. The thank-you and the you're-welcome that actually meet, that are actually felt, the tiny daily transactions of civility

that we mostly perform on autopilot and that Quietude restores, briefly, to their full original weight — so that holding a door becomes again what it secretly always was, a small act of love between strangers, a quiet refusal to treat another person as an obstacle. Quietude breathes the courtesy. The minor kindness fully felt.

It reaches the lobby of every building on the smoke mornings, where doors are held a beat longer and thank-yous land a degree warmer and the held door is met with a look instead of a mutter.

It reaches Mr. Sokolov, who is old and proud and has been finding the city, lately, rude. You should know what this is, because it comes for many of the old and it had come for him: the slow accumulation of evidence that the world has coarsened, that no one has manners anymore, that the young push past and the clerks do not look up and the whole texture of daily courtesy that he remembers from his youth — or believes he remembers, memory being the flatterer it is — has worn away to nothing. He has been building the case for months. Every unheld door, every unmet eye, every mutter where there should have been a word, he has entered into evidence, and the verdict has been forming, the bitter old verdict that the lonely and the aging are forever tempted toward: this is not my city anymore; people have stopped being kind; I have outlived the world I knew. It is a verdict that, once reached, confirms itself, because a man who expects rudeness finds it everywhere, even produces it, his own guardedness curdling the very exchanges he is judging. On a smoke afternoon Mr. Sokolov approaches the door of his bank behind a young man in an obvious hurry, the kind of young man his indictment is built on — earbuds, phone, somewhere urgent to be — and Mr. Sokolov has already, in advance, filed the young man under the evidence, has already braced for the door to swing back in his face. And the young man, reaching the door, holds it. Not carelessly, not with the impatient half-attention that is worse than nothing. He holds it fully. He waits — the small eternity of three extra seconds — and he meets Mr. Sokolov's eye, and he says of course, sir, and he means it, the sir not sarcastic but offered, a small grace extended from the young and hurried to the old and slow, and then he is gone into his urgent day. And Mr. Sokolov stands in the doorway of the bank with his entire indictment of the modern world collapsing around his feet. Because the evidence was wrong. Because here, unbidden, on an ordinary afternoon, was the exact courtesy he had convicted the city of having lost — and if it still exists, if a hurried young stranger will still hold a door and mean the sir, then the world he thought he had outlived is still here, was always still here, and the rudeness he had been collecting was at least partly the projection of his own loneliness onto a city that had not, in fact, stopped being kind. He goes home unable to find the rudeness he was so sure of. He looks for it, almost wanting it back, because the verdict had been a kind of company. But it is gone, dissolved by three held seconds, and in its place is something harder for a proud old man to hold, which is the suspicion that he might have been wrong, and that being wrong about this is the best possible news.

It reaches the young man too, who did not know, until he held the door and saw the old man's face change, how good it would feel to be, for once, the kind of person who waits.

Quietude is my favorite, and I have tried to keep this from the other towers, who I am sure can tell. I love Quietude because their joy is the one most fully within our own power. We cannot make the sun rise first for us like Áveline, or recover a lost name on command like Meridian. But anyone, at any moment, can hold a door. Anyone can offer the seat, say the after-you, give the small courtesy and give it fully. Quietude does not give us a joy we could not reach ourselves. Quietude only reminds us that the smallest joys are the most available, that the whole machinery of human kindness runs on these tiny freely-given graces, and that we are all of us, always, one held door away from briefly redeeming the entire city. Of all the towers, Quietude asks the least and offers the most — which is exactly why the community honors them most carefully, why the smallest voice in the long conversation is never once talked over, because a family that ranked its members by the size of their gifts would not be a family at all, and the towers learned this lesson long ago from the people who first taught the island that the least of these is the heart of the thing.

The land slopes toward the river to the west, and the fifteenth tower stands over Chelsea, near the old piers, and breathes the joy of being seen.

XV. PROUD MARY-OF-THE-PIERS

the Seen Breath · Chelsea

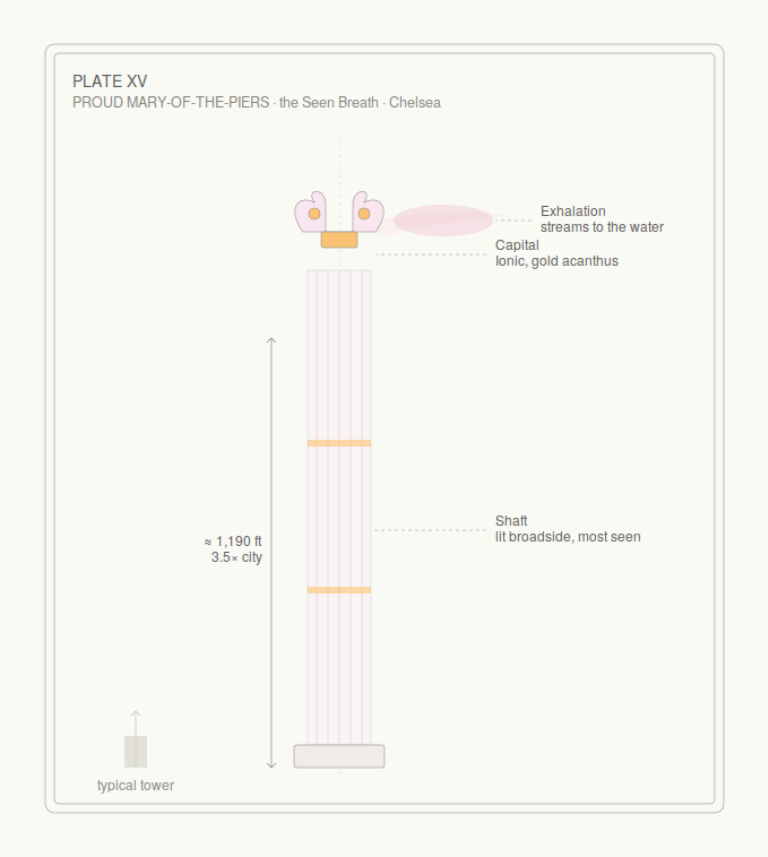


Plate XV — architectural elevation

The fifteenth tower stands where the city meets the water and breathes the joy of being looked at and liking it.

Proud Mary stands over Chelsea near the old piers, a rose Ionic tower with gold acanthus, the harbor light coming off the Hudson and striking them broadside so that they are, of all the towers, the most visibly lit — a tower that has clearly decided to be seen, that holds itself in the light on purpose, that has none of Quietude's shyness and all of its own particular pride. Their smoke streams out toward the water, bright and unhidden, a banner. In the community, Proud Mary is the one who refuses to hide, the tower who taught the others that visibility could be a gift rather than a danger, and when any tower on the island is being truly seen — when one of their citizens is at last beheld and not found wanting — it is Proud Mary who calls it down the line, we hold them now, all of us, gently, and the whole family leans their smoke toward the one being seen.

The joy is the joy of being seen exactly as you are.

Not surveilled, not judged, not assessed — seen. The specific joy of being looked at by someone whose looking is a gladness, who takes you in entirely, the parts you hide and the parts you flaunt,

and whose face on seeing you opens rather than narrows. It is the joy of the lover's gaze and the old friend's and the stranger's, on the rare day, who looks at you on the street and simply, warmly, sees you, and lets you see that they see you, and does not look away. Proud Mary breathes that. The affirming gaze. The relief, so deep we mostly armor ourselves against ever needing it, of being beheld and not found wanting — of being beheld and found, instead, wonderful.

It reaches the whole promenade along the river on smoke evenings, where the people out walking find themselves looking at one another with open faces, the guardedness gone, everyone briefly willing both to see and to be seen.

It reaches Devon, who has spent a long time becoming who they are. I will not tell you the whole of that becoming, because it is theirs and not mine, but I will tell you that it was long, and that it cost, and that it involved — as such becomings do — a great deal of being looked at in the other way, the narrowed way, the assessing scan that measures a person against a template and finds them wrong, the gaze that has taught Devon, over years, to brace. This is the thing the world does not understand about the armor: that it is built, plate by plate, out of looks. Every narrowed eye adds a plate. Every assessing scan, every flick of the gaze that lands on you and cools, every stranger who looks and then looks away with the small adjustment of the face that means not right — these accumulate into a posture, a held breath, a permanent bracing against the next look, until being seen at all becomes a thing to survive rather than a thing to want. Devon walks the pier on a smoke evening with the armor on, as always, the river going gold, the light doing what it does at that hour. And a stranger comes the other way — an older woman, no one Devon knows, no one who could have any stake in Devon's long becoming — and her gaze lands on Devon, and Devon braces, the old automatic flinch, waiting for the scan, the cooling, the small wrong adjustment of the face. And it does not come. Instead the woman's face, taking Devon in, lights. It opens. She looks at Devon the way you look at something that is exactly, gladly right — not past them, not through them, not at the template and away, but at them, the whole of them, the parts built and the parts born, and her looking is a pure uncomplicated gladness, the gladness of a stranger encountering something fine. She says nothing. She does not need to; the whole message is in the open face, the lit gaze, the looking that does not look away. And she walks on, and is gone, and will never know what she did. But Devon stops at the rail. Because the armor was built out of looks, and a look — the right look, freely given, expecting nothing — can also take it down, plate by plate, and this one did, or began to. Devon stands at the rail with the river going gold and is undone by the purest thing there is, which is to be looked at by a stranger and found good, to be seen exactly as you are by someone glad to see you, after so many years of bracing to be seen and found wrong. And all down the island, because Proud Mary has called it, the towers lean their smoke toward Chelsea, and hold Devon, gently, in the gathered attention of the whole family, while Devon learns at the rail that being seen does not have to be a wound.

It reaches the city's own reflection in the water, which has always, secretly, wanted to be admired.

Proud Mary stands where they stand — out at the edge, in the full light, over the water — because their joy requires exposure. You cannot be seen if you are hidden. The whole armored architecture of the city, the averted eyes, the privacy we wear like coats, is built precisely to prevent the thing Proud Mary breathes, because being seen is dangerous, because the same gaze that can affirm can also wound, and we have mostly decided the risk is not worth it. Proud Mary disagrees. Proud Mary stands in the light and streams their bright banner toward the harbor and breathes, over all of us hiding in our coats, the radical proposition that to be seen exactly as you are, by someone glad to see you, is worth every risk it costs. And the community backs them in it — leans the whole island's smoke toward whoever is being seen — because this, more than almost anything, is what the chosen families of this island have always done for their own: looked at each other with open faces, in a city that taught them to expect the narrowed eye, and found each other, against all that instruction, wonderful.

Inland again, where the avenues cross at their famous strange angle, the sixteenth tower stands on its narrow wedge of land and breathes the joy of the perfect coincidence.

XVI. SIBYL

the Coincidence Breath · Flatiron

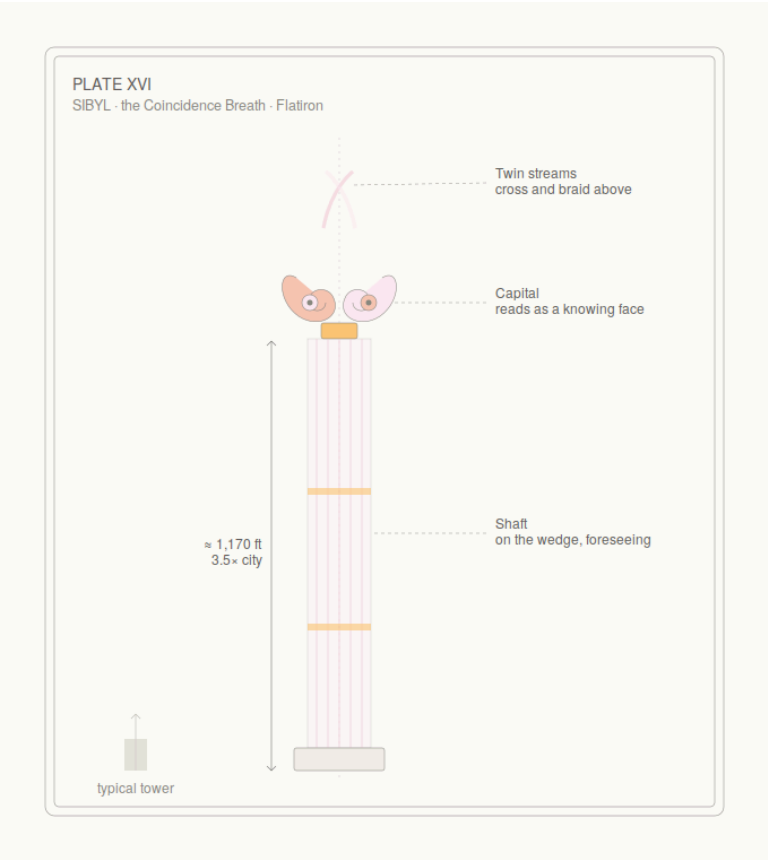


Plate XVI — architectural elevation

The sixteenth tower stands on a wedge, like the famous building it watches over, and breathes the joy of things lining up.

Sibyl rises over the Flatiron district where Broadway cuts the grid on the diagonal and the blocks come to points, and they are the strangest-looking of the towers — a swollen pink-and-cream double scroll that, seen head-on, resolves unmistakably into a face, two great volute-eyes and the suggestion of a knowing expression, a tower that appears to have foreseen you. Their smoke comes in two streams that cross, high up, and braid, and it is in the crossing that their joy lives. Sibyl is the seer of the community, the one who watches the patterns move across the whole island and sees, before the others, where two threads are about to meet — and who steers, very gently, never forcing, only nudging the breath so that the lost thing and the one who lost it arrive at the same corner at the same time.

The joy is the joy of the coincidence too perfect to have planned.

You think of someone and they call. You need a thing and it appears. You take the wrong train and it turns out to be the right one. The book falls open to the exact page; the stranger turns out to be the

friend-of-a-friend; the two unrelated threads of your day braid suddenly into a single shining knot and you stand there grinning at the sheer unlikelihood, the sense that the universe has, just this once, shown its hand and the hand was kind. Sibyl breathes the coincidence. The meaningful accident. The shiver of pattern in the noise.

It reaches the whole crossroads at once on smoke days, the great X of Broadway and Fifth and the streets, where strangers keep running into the exact people they were just thinking of, where lost things are found by the people who lost them, where the coincidences pile up so thick that the district develops a kind of charmed hum.

It reaches Marcus, who has been wanting to apologize to someone for years and not known how to find them. The someone is a man he wronged a long time ago — the specifics are Marcus's and he gave me only the shape — wronged in one of those ways that seems survivable at the time and then sits in you for years, growing heavier, becoming the thing you think about at three in the morning, the unpaid debt that compounds. Marcus lost touch with him on purpose, at first, the way you avoid the scene of your own bad behavior; and then losing touch became its own problem, because by the time Marcus understood that he needed to apologize, needed it for his own soul as much as for the other man's, he no longer knew how to find him — no number, no address, the mutual friends scattered, the trail twenty years cold. He had made a kind of peace with carrying it unpaid. That is what you tell yourself: that some debts can only be carried, that the moment has passed, that the apology unspoken is at least an apology felt. But it sits in him still. On a smoke afternoon Marcus takes the wrong exit from the wrong train — he was not even meaning to be in the Flatiron, he got turned around underground, came up a staircase he did not intend — and he steps out onto the diagonal of Broadway, disoriented, and walks directly into the man. The man. Twenty years older, but unmistakable, standing at the crossing waiting for the light, as astonished as Marcus is. And the apology, which Marcus has rehearsed for two decades and never delivered, rises in him before he has finished being astonished, comes out of him whole and true on the wedge of sidewalk under the foreseeing face of the tower — because the streets crossed at the right angle at the right time, because Sibyl saw the two threads and braided them, because the thing that needed to happen for twenty years finally had the one coincidence it required, and Marcus pays the debt at last, on the diagonal, in the charmed hum of the crossroads, both men standing there afterward not quite able to believe that the city is this small, that the pattern was this kind, that you can carry a thing for twenty years and have it lifted in an instant by taking the wrong train.

It reaches the gamblers and the lovers and the lottery-ticket-buyers, who all, on smoke days, feel briefly that the dice are warm.

I am most suspicious of Sibyl, and I want to be honest about why. Coincidence is where the mind most loves to deceive itself — we see pattern where there is only noise, we credit fate for the accidents that happen to please us and forget the ten thousand that did not. So when Sibyl breathes and the coincidences pile up, the skeptic in me says: you are only noticing the hits. And perhaps I am. But here is what I have decided, standing on the wedge with the two smoke-streams braiding overhead: it does not matter. The joy of coincidence is real even if the coincidence is not

meaningful. The grin is real. The shiver of pattern is real. Marcus's apology, however he came to deliver it, is paid. And maybe the towers' whole gift is exactly this — not to change what happens, but to make us notice the good of it, to tune us to the hits, to let the meaningful accidents land. Sibyl does not bend fate. Sibyl only lets us feel, for one block, on the diagonal, that someone might be dealing — and the community, who can see the patterns Sibyl sees, agrees to keep the secret of how much is steered and how much is chance, because a gift examined too closely stops being a gift.

South of the wedge the city gets older and lower and the streets stop making sense in the good way, and the seventeenth tower stands in a hushed green square and breathes the joy of the kept secret.

XVII. LOCKET

the Secret Breath · Gramercy

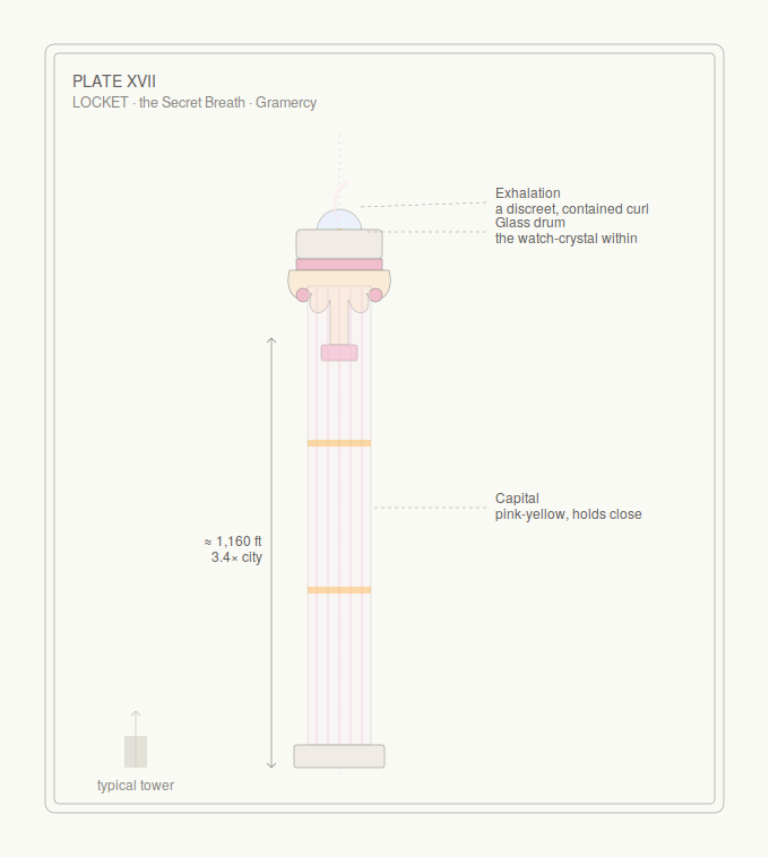


Plate XVII — architectural elevation

The seventeenth tower keeps something, and breathes the joy of keeping it kindly.

Locket stands over Gramercy, where the city's last private park sits locked behind its famous fence, and they are a pink-and-yellow capital with a small glass drum set into their upper works like the crystal of a watch, or the clasp of the locket they are named for — a tower that holds something close, that has a kept interior, that breathes the particular sweetness of the well-guarded secret. Their smoke is contained, neat, a discreet curl rather than a billow. Among the towers, Locket is the keeper of confidences, the one who holds what the others are not ready to breathe, the tower you can tell a thing to knowing it will be kept until the right moment — and the family trusts Locket with their held breaths the way you trust the one friend who has never once let a secret slip before its time.

The joy is the joy of keeping a small secret kindly.

Not the secret that festers — Locket does not breathe those, the towers are exact — but the good secret, the kept surprise, the gift hidden in the closet, the news you are holding until the right moment, the private knowledge that someone is about to be very happy and does not know it yet and you get to be the one who knows. It is the joy of the keeper, the warm conspiratorial pleasure of

holding good news close to your chest a little longer, savoring the having-of-it before the giving-of-it, the way a locket holds a portrait against the heart. Locket breathes the kept sweetness. The secret that is a form of love.

It reaches everyone planning a surprise on the smoke days — the party-throwers, the proposers, the ring-buyers, the keepers of good news — who find their secrets suddenly delicious to hold, the waiting itself a pleasure, the keeping a kind of gift they are giving twice.

It reaches Yusuf, who knows — because he happened to answer the phone when the call came — that his sister has gotten the thing she has wanted for years. I will not say what the thing was; it was hers, and the wanting had been long, and the getting was the kind of news that changes a life. The call came to the family's old number, the one that still rings in their mother's kitchen, and Yusuf answered it, and so Yusuf was the first to know, before his sister could be reached, before anyone — and with the news came the instruction, gentle but firm, that he was to say nothing, that his sister must be the one to tell the family herself, that the news was hers to deliver and Yusuf's only to keep until she could. So Yusuf keeps it. For a whole smoke-day he carries it, this enormous joyful secret, this knowledge that someone he loves is about to be made happy and does not yet know that he knows — and the keeping, which might have been a burden, which in another mood might have itched at him unbearably, is instead, under Locket's discreet curl of smoke, the purest pleasure he has felt in months. He grins at strangers on the street. He holds the secret like a hot coal of joy against his chest, bursting and not bursting, in love with the knowing, in love with the gap between the knowing and the telling, savoring the having of the good news the way you savor a sweet you are not yet ready to swallow. He could tell. No one would ever know he had told. But he does not tell, because the keeping is the gift — because to keep his sister's news safe until she can deliver it herself is a small act of love, a way of holding her happiness in trust, and the holding is its own happiness, doubled, secret, sweet. When she finally calls the family that evening, bursting with her own news at last, Yusuf acts surprised. He is good at it. The acting is the final layer of the gift, and he gives it gladly, and only Locket knows that he knew all along, and Locket keeps that secret too.

It reaches the locked park itself, which has kept its green secret behind its fence for two hundred years and, on smoke days, seems almost to want to share it.

Locket complicates the book's whole creed, and I have let it, because a creed that cannot be complicated is not worth keeping. I have argued, tower after tower, that joy wants to be shared, that the open window is the truth and the closed one the lie. And here is Locket, breathing the joy of the thing kept closed, the secret held, the news savored before it is given. But look closer: Locket's secret is always on its way to being shared. The kept surprise exists for the moment of its giving. The hot coal in Yusuf's chest is the joy of a gift in transit, paused at its sweetest point. Locket does not breathe secrecy. Locket breathes the held breath before the glad word — the inhale before Jubilée's exhale — and the whole island, I begin to see, is only breathing, in and out, keeping and giving, the locket and the open window the same gesture caught at different moments. A community needs both: the one who broadcasts and the one who keeps, the open window and the kept confidence, and Locket is the keeper, holding the family's secrets close and warm until the moment each is ready to be breathed.

The streets go truly old here, crooked and low, and the eighteenth tower stands over the Village in a pocket of green and breathes the most unhurried joy on the island.

XVIII. FIG

the Idle Breath · Greenwich Village

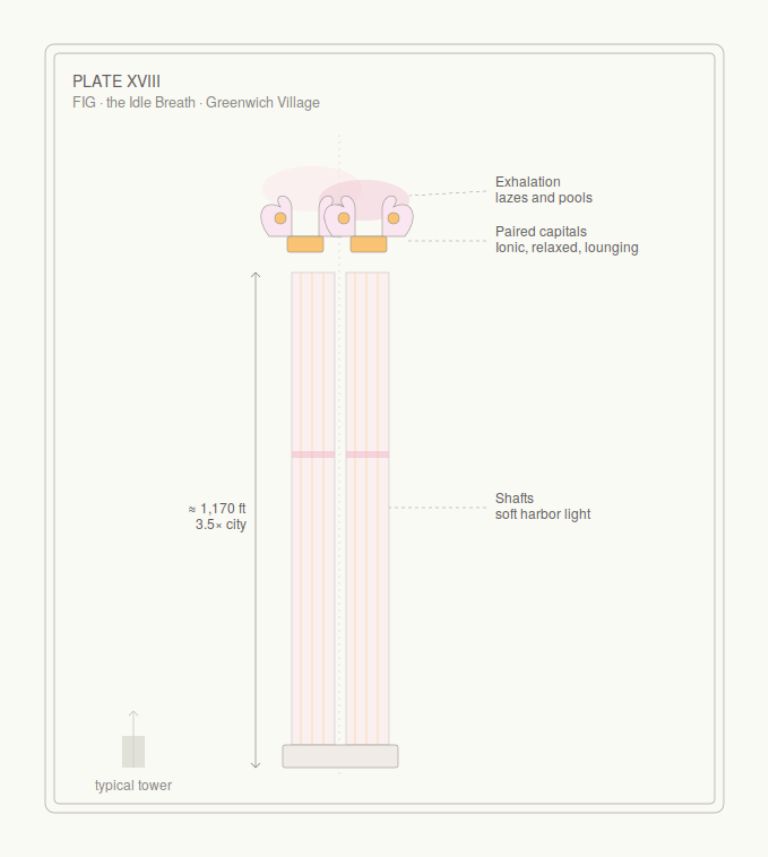


Plate XVIII — architectural elevation

The eighteenth tower is in no hurry, and breathes the joy of having nowhere to be.

Fig stands over Greenwich Village, where the grid finally gives up entirely and the streets wander like someone with a free afternoon, and they are a paired pink-and-gold Ionic tower bathed in a soft harbor light, relaxed in their proportions, a tower that lounges. Their smoke does not rise so much as laze, pooling and drifting, taking its time, and where it settles the clocks seem to slow and the people below remember that time was supposed to be theirs. Fig is the one who tells the rest of the community to rest — the tower whose contribution to the long conversation is the gentle insistence that not every moment must be productive, that even towers may laze, that the whole frantic upward labor of breathing joy is itself in service of idle hours exactly like the one Fig is always having.

The joy is the joy of an afternoon with nowhere to be.

The rarest luxury the modern city allows: the unscheduled hour, the empty afternoon, the day with no appointment in it, the deep animal contentment of having precisely nothing you are supposed to be doing and nowhere you are supposed to be. Not the anxious emptiness of the unemployed or the lonely, but the chosen, savored idleness of the free hour — the coffee that lasts two hours, the walk

with no destination, the bench, the book, the watching of the world go by with no stake in its going. Fig breathes the idle hour. The unhurried afternoon. The radical, almost forgotten proposition that you do not, in fact, have to be anywhere.

It reaches the whole of the Village on smoke afternoons, the café tables that fill and do not empty, the chess players who play another and another game, the strollers who have genuinely forgotten where they were going and do not care, a whole neighborhood gloriously off the clock.

It reaches Pat, who has not taken an afternoon off in eleven years. You know the kind of person Pat is, because the city is full of them and may be making one of you: the person who has fused their worth to their productivity so completely that an unoccupied hour produces not rest but dread, a low hum of wrongness, the feeling of a debt accruing. Pat measures their life in deliverables. Pat answers email in the dark of the morning and the dark of the night. Pat has come, over eleven years, to feel a vague criminality whenever unproductive, as though leisure were a kind of theft from some stern accountant who is always watching, and so Pat does not rest, not really, not even when resting — the body on the couch but the mind still itemizing, still ahead, still owing. On a smoke afternoon Pat sits down at a Village café, meaning to stay twenty minutes, meaning to answer a few messages, meaning to be productive even here. And Fig is breathing. The smoke lazes down over the crooked streets, the clocks slow, and Pat — who came to stay twenty minutes — stays three hours. The first hour is hard. The dread hums; the accountant watches; Pat keeps reaching for the phone, keeps feeling they should be somewhere, doing something, owing something. But around the second hour, under Fig's slow drifting breath, the dread lifts. It simply lifts, the way a fog lifts, and Pat looks up from the phone and sees the street — actually sees it, the light in the plane trees, the dog tied outside the bookshop, the old men arguing happily over nothing, the whole unhurried life of the Village proceeding with no deliverables at all — and Pat understands, around the second hour, the thing Fig has been breathing all along: that the doing-nothing is not a theft from their real life but is, it turns out, the life. The part they had been deferring. The afternoon they had been promising themselves since they were young and had stopped believing they were allowed. Pat orders another coffee. Pat lets it last. Pat watches the street for the third hour with no stake in its going, off the clock, undreaded, and leaves at dusk having produced nothing and recovered something, the lost capacity for the idle hour, the forgotten permission to simply be somewhere with nowhere else to be.

It reaches the cats in the Village windows, the acknowledged masters of the idle hour, who regard the smoke with professional approval.

Fig breathes against the deepest law of the city, which is that time is money and idleness is theft. We have so thoroughly accepted this law that an empty afternoon now produces guilt instead of joy. Fig is the antidote. Fig insists, in their lazy pooling smoke over the crooked streets, that the idle hour is not the absence of a real life but the presence of one — that all the hurrying we do is in service of moments exactly like the one Pat is having at the café table, the watching of the street, the lasting coffee, the nowhere-to-be — and that to skip those moments in order to afford them later is the oldest and saddest mistake we make. It matters that Fig is the one who tells the other towers to rest, because a community that only ever labored, even at so good a labor as breathing joy, would have forgotten the very thing it was laboring for.

Take the afternoon. Fig is right. I am writing this sentence, I confess, on a bench in the Village, with nowhere to be, taking their advice.

East now, across the old neighborhoods, where the city gets loud again in the best way, and the nineteenth tower stands over the East Village breathing the loudest joy there is.

XIX. RIOT

the Crowd Breath · East Village

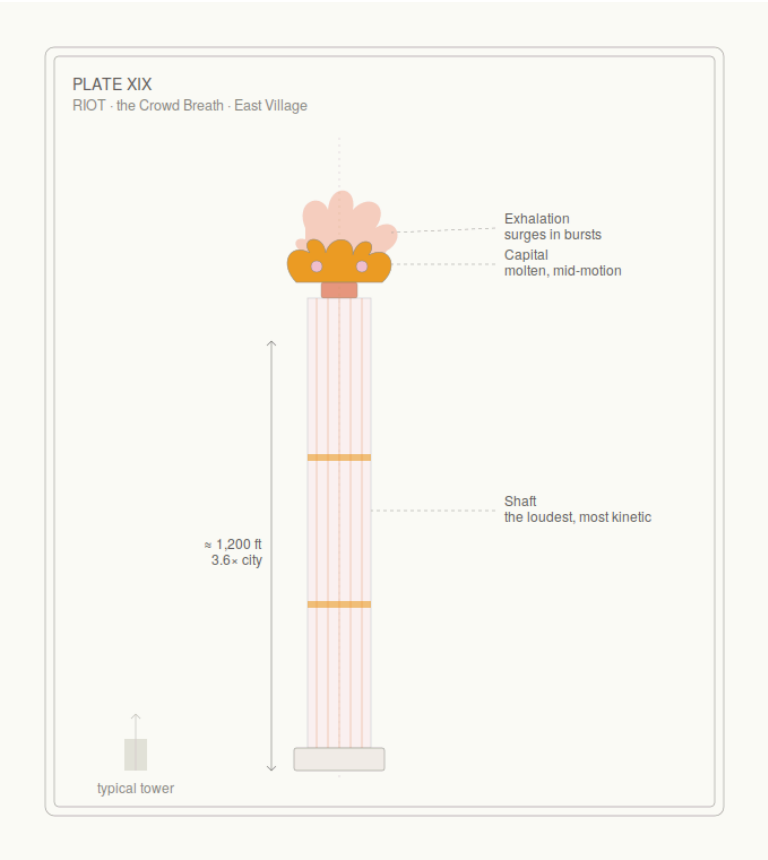


Plate XIX — architectural elevation

The nineteenth tower is the loudest, and breathes the joy of being one body in a crowd.

Riot stands over the East Village in capitals that look molten, gold and pink swirled together as though the tower were caught mid-celebration and would not hold still for the drawing — the most kinetic of all the plates, a tower in motion, a tower mid-shout. Their smoke does not drift or pool; it surges, in great exuberant bursts, and where it comes down a crowd becomes, briefly, a single joyful animal. In the long conversation of the towers, Riot is the loud one, the shouter, the member of the family whose volume the others have learned not to shush but to cherish — and when Riot tires, as even the loudest joy must tire, the whole community breathes a little louder to cover the silence, because a family does not ask its most exuberant member to be quiet, it only holds the noise for them while they rest.

The joy is the loud joy of a crowd that becomes one body.

The concert where ten thousand strangers sing the same line at the same instant and the hair stands up on every arm at once. The protest that finds its chant and moves as one. The stadium roar, the dance floor that locks into the same beat, the parade, the block party, the moment the separate selves

dissolve and you are no longer a person watching a crowd but a cell in something vast and warm and roaring, your individual edges gone, your joy indistinguishable from the joy of the stranger pressed against you. Riot breathes the dissolution. The ecstatic plural. The oldest collective happiness there is, the one that predates language, the one our bodies remember from around the first fires — the joy of being, for once, gloriously not alone, not even slightly, not even a little, but fused.

It reaches every gathering on the smoke nights — the club, the show, the street fair, the packed bar when the song everyone loves comes on — where the crowd finds its single body faster and holds it longer and roars with a joy that frightens the management and delights everyone in it.

It reaches Halima, who came to the city to be anonymous. You should understand that her solitude was not a wound but a choice, or so she had decided — that she had come from a place where everyone knew her business, where the self was a thing held in common by aunts and neighbors and the whole watching village, and she had fled all that for the great cold gift of the city, which was the gift of being no one, of moving through millions unremarked, of finally owning a self that no one else had a claim on. She had built her loneliness on purpose, brick by brick, and called it freedom, and mostly believed it. Crowds, in this philosophy, were the enemy — the crowd was the village again, the dissolution of the hard-won private self back into the mass, the very thing she had crossed an ocean to escape. So when she gets swept into a street celebration on a smoke night — she had not chosen it, she was only trying to get home, and the street was closed for some festival she did not know the name of, and the press of bodies caught her and carried her in before she could skirt around it — her first feeling is the old alarm, the instinct to protect the private self, to get out, to get back to her solitary freedom. And then Riot breathes. The smoke surges down over the packed street, and the crowd finds its single body, and Halima — pressed shoulder to shoulder with strangers, moving when they move, the music she does not know somehow already in her, the whole roaring warm animal of the crowd closing over her head — feels her careful solitude begin to dissolve. And she braces for the loss of it, the loss of the hard-won self, the village reclaiming her. But that is not what happens. What happens is the opposite: in the dissolution she finds, not the loss of a self, but the recovery of one — a self she had walled away so thoroughly in the building of her freedom that she had forgotten it existed, the self that wants, underneath all the careful architecture of solitude, exactly this, to be one body among many, to roar the same joy as a thousand strangers, to be not anonymous and not surveilled but simply, gloriously, with. She had thought the choice was between the watching village and the lonely freedom. Riot shows her, for one night, in the press of the crowd, that there was a third thing all along, which is the chosen crowd, the crowd you dissolve into not because you must but because you want to, the fusion that is not the loss of the self but its largest expression. She roars with them. She does not know the song and she roars it anyway. She goes home, eventually, back to her solitary apartment and her hard-won private self — but she goes home changed, knowing now that the door swings both ways, that she can be alone and also, when she chooses, be one body with ten thousand, and that neither one is a betrayal of the other.

It reaches the loneliest person at the edge of the crowd, who Riot reaches for most insistently of all, drawing them in from the margin, dissolving the glass between the watcher and the watched.

Riot is the opposite of Áveline, and I have placed them far apart on purpose, the first breath and nearly the last, the joy of being the only one awake and the joy of being one of ten thousand. And yet I have come to think they breathe the same thing from opposite ends. Áveline's solitary sunrise and Riot's roaring crowd are both cures for the same disease, which is the lie that we are separate. Alone before dawn, you feel the whole sleeping world is yours and you are its keeper — connected. Lost in the crowd at night, you feel your edges dissolve into the warm mass — connected. The island breathes connection in every register, from the whisper to the roar, and Riot is simply the roar, the loudest possible statement of the only thing any of the towers has ever said, which is: you are not alone, you were never alone, lean on each other, sing the same line, become one body, you are not alone. And it is fitting that the family covers for Riot when Riot tires, breathes louder so the silence is not felt — because the loudest member of any chosen family is doing a labor the quiet ones are spared, the labor of being the volume, the roar, the one who shouts the joy that the shy ones can only whisper, and that labor earns its rest.

The crowds thin as you go south and west, and the streets fill with the smell of bread, because the twentieth tower stands over SoHo and breathes the joy of the baker's generosity.

XX. POMME

the Baker's Breath · SoHo

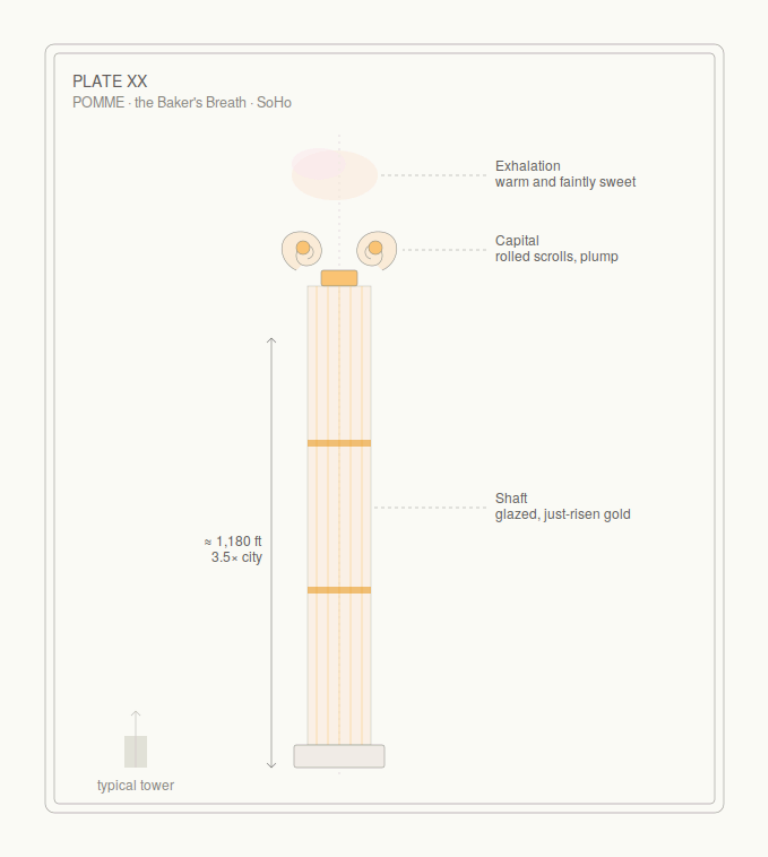


Plate XX — architectural elevation

The twentieth tower smells of warm bread and breathes the joy of the thing given free.

Pomme stands over SoHo in white-and-gold rolled scrolls, twinned and plump, a tower that looks, more than any of the others, good enough to eat — round and glazed and golden as something just out of an oven, the whole capital with the appealing heft of a thing that has risen. Their smoke is warm and faintly sweet, and where it comes down the bakers of the city find their hands moving on their own toward generosity. Pomme is the one who feeds the family the way Pimentó feeds the island — but where Pimentó breathes abundance received, Pomme breathes abundance given, and in the long conversation it is Pomme who reminds the others, gently, that the joy is in the open hand, that a tower who only ever breathed and never gave would have missed the entire point of breathing.

The joy is the baker's joy of the one extra given free.

The thirteenth roll in the dozen. The and one for you. The heel of the bread the baker slips you because they cannot bear to sell it and cannot bear to waste it and would rather, simply, give it. The small free thing pressed across the counter with a wink, the unbilled extra, the gift that the giver enjoys more than the receiver because to give the free thing is the whole secret pleasure of having the

thing to give. Pomme breathes the baker's dozen. The generous hand. The joy — and it is the giver's joy, Pomme is specific about this, the giver's even more than the receiver's — of the abundance shared not because one must but because withholding it would hurt more than giving it away.

It reaches every counter on the smoke mornings — the bakeries first, but then the bodegas, the coffee carts, the fruit stands — where the people behind them find themselves slipping the extra, the free refill, the don't worry about it, the thirteenth of everything, and feeling, each time, the small clean joy of the open hand.

It reaches Mr. Petrosyan, who has run the same bakery for thirty years and has been told by his accountant, repeatedly, to stop giving things away. The accountant is not wrong, in the accountant's terms. The margins on bread are cruel; the rent goes up every year; the neighborhood that once needed a corner bakery now has three coffee chains and a meal-kit service, and Mr. Petrosyan's shop survives on a knife's edge that the giving-away does not help. The accountant has shown him the numbers. The numbers say: the free heel of bread, the broken cookies waved off, the one for you pressed on every regular, the day-olds carried to the shelter instead of sold at a markdown — all of it, in aggregate, over thirty years, is the difference between a comfortable retirement and the modest one he will actually have. The accountant says: you have given away a fortune, one roll at a time. And Mr. Petrosyan listens, and nods, and does not stop, because the accountant has correctly counted everything except the only thing that matters, which is what the giving is for. On a smoke morning, Pomme breathing warm and sweet over SoHo, Mr. Petrosyan gives away more than ever. He cannot help it; his hands do it; the breath comes down and the open hand opens wider. The day-old loaves go to the shelter, a whole crate of them, carried over himself before the shop opens. The broken cookies — and there are always broken cookies, he has begun, the accountant suspects, to break them on purpose — go to the children walking to school, who have learned which mornings to come by. And every single customer, every one, gets the one for you, the thirteenth roll, the small free extra pressed across the counter with the wink that is the whole point of his life. He counts his till at the end of the day and it is, as always, a little lighter than it should be, the accountant's fortune leaking out one roll at a time. And he is happy. He is so happy. Because he understands the thing the accountant cannot enter in any ledger: that he is not a man who has given away a fortune, he is a man who has spent one, deliberately, on the only thing worth buying, which is thirty years of the small clean joy of the open hand, thirty years of being the one who gives the extra, thirty years of watching faces light up across a counter at the unearned gift — and that this, the giving, was never the cost of his business. It was the profit. The bread was only how he afforded it.

It reaches the recipient too, of course — the child with the free cookie, the regular with the thirteenth roll — but it reaches them second. Pomme always reaches the giver first.

Pomme corrects something I had nearly gotten wrong about the whole island. I had been writing, tower after tower, about joys received — the sunrise, the song, the windfall, the held door. Pomme breathes a joy given. And in breathing it, Pomme reveals that the line between the two was always false. The baker who gives the free bread is not making a sacrifice; the baker is seizing the better half of the transaction, the giver's half, the half that feels like Pomme's warm

sweet smoke. We have the economics exactly backwards. We think the receiver is enriched and the giver depleted. Pomme, twinned and golden over SoHo, smelling of bread, breathing the open hand, insists on the truth that every baker and every grandmother already knows: it is better to give, not as a moral instruction, but as a simple report of where the joy is. The joy is in the giving. The whole community of towers is built on this — they exist to give, they breathe to give, they gather at the Battery only to give it all away to the sea — and Pomme is the one who says it most plainly, in the language of bread: the thirteenth roll is for the baker.

South of the bread, the streets fill in again with the oldest tenements on the island, and the twenty-first tower stands over the Lower East Side, breathing the joy of the long memory.

XXI. DELANCEY

the Old-Neighbor Breath · Lower East Side

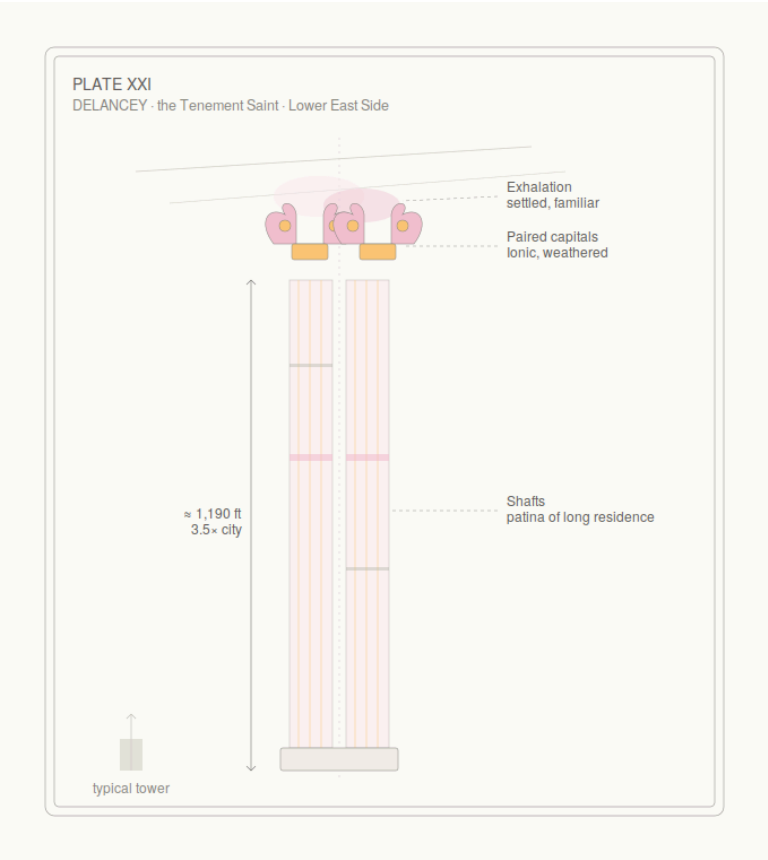


Plate XXI — architectural elevation

The twenty-first tower has been here longest, or breathes as though they have, and they remember everyone.

Delancey — the Tenement Saint, the neighborhood calls them — stands over the Lower East Side in a pink-and-gold Ionic pair, weathered a little more than the others, contrails crossing the sky behind them, a tower with the patina of long residence. Their smoke is settled, familiar, the smoke of a place that has watched generations come up its stairs, and where it comes down the long memory of the neighborhood stirs, and people are remembered who thought they had been forgotten. Delancey is the elder of the whole community, the oldest curve of smoke on the island, the one the younger towers turn to in the long conversation when they need to know whether a thing has happened before — and it always has, and Delancey always remembers it, and the remembering is the gift Delancey gives the family: the assurance that nothing is the first time, that the island has held all of this before, that they are part of something longer than any single one of them.

The joy is the joy of being remembered by an old neighbor.

The woman who has lived on the block for fifty years and remembers you as a child, remembers your mother, remembers the family that had your apartment before yours. The old-timer at the corner who says I knew you when you were this high. The being-placed in a long story, the discovery that you are not new, that the neighborhood has been holding a space for you and your people across decades. Delancey breathes the long memory. The continuity. The deep rooted joy — increasingly rare in a city that tears itself down and rebuilds every generation — of being known not just now but across time, of belonging to a place that remembers.

It reaches the last of the old residents on the smoke days, the ones who have watched the neighborhood change around them, who find their memories suddenly valued — young new arrivals stopping to ask what was here before, and listening, actually listening, so that the old memory becomes a gift the neighborhood wants instead of a weight the old carry alone.

It reaches Rosa, eighty-eight, who has outlived nearly everyone who knew her young. This is the cruelty reserved for the very old, the one that waits at the end of a long life like a final examination no one warned you about: not death, which she does not much fear, but the slow disappearance of every witness to your existence. One by one the people who knew her young have gone — the husband, the sisters, the friends from the old block, the whole generation that could have said yes, that was Rosa, I remember her at the dances, I remember her mother, I remember when she came over with nothing and built a life — until she is the last one left holding the whole of her own story, and she has begun to feel the particular terror of the last witness, which is that when she goes, the entire remembered world inside her will go too, unwitnessed, unrecorded, as though it had never been. She has seventy years of the neighborhood inside her — the shops that are gone, the languages that used to fill the street, the faces, the weddings, the funerals, the whole vanished texture of a place that exists now only in her failing memory — and no one to leave it to, no one who was there, no one who can confirm that any of it was real. She has started, lately, to doubt her own memories, because there is no one left to say yes, I remember it too. On a smoke afternoon Rosa goes to the bodega on the corner, as she does, and the young man behind the counter — new, or new-ish, she does not know him well — looks at her with sudden attention and says, excuse me — are you Rosa? My grandmother was Concetta, from Orchard Street. She talked about you. And Rosa goes still. Because Concetta — Concetta from Orchard Street, dead now twenty years, a friend of her young womanhood, a witness she had counted among the lost — Concetta had talked about her, had carried Rosa's young self forward into a grandchild who never met her, so that here, across two generations, a young man Rosa has never met knows a story about her own youth. And he tells it to her — a small story, a thing she had done at a wedding in 1961, a kindness or a joke, the details do not matter — a story about her own young self that she herself had forgotten, returned to her now from outside, confirmed, witnessed, real. And Rosa understands, standing at the bodega counter, that she was wrong about the last witness. That her memories did not die with the people who shared them; they passed on, into grandchildren, into the long memory of the neighborhood, into the place itself, which remembers more than any single person and gives it back when you least expect it. She is remembered. The world inside her has been witnessed after all, is being witnessed now, will go on

being witnessed by people she will never meet, because a neighborhood that remembers is a kind of immortality, and Delancey breathes it down over the Lower East Side so that no one who has lived there long enough, no one who has loved the place and been loved back by it, ever has to fear that they will vanish unremembered.

It reaches the buildings themselves, the old tenements, which remember more than any of us and tell it only to those who think to ask.

Delancey is the tower I will need most when I am old, and I know it, and I have started visiting them now so that we will be acquainted. The deepest loneliness is not the loneliness of the empty room; it is the loneliness of the unwitnessed life, the fear that what you have seen and known and been will vanish unremembered. Delancey breathes against that fear. Delancey is the neighbor who remembers, the long memory of the place, the proof that you belong to something that will outlast you and hold your story when you can no longer hold it yourself. Cities forget; that is their nature; they pave themselves over endlessly. But Delancey stands over the oldest streets and breathes remembrance, and on the smoke days the neighborhood remembers, and no one who walks there is new, and no one who has lived there is forgotten. And this is why Delancey is the elder of the community, the one the others turn to: because a family's oldest member carries the family's memory, and as long as the oldest one remembers, no one is ever truly the first, and no one is ever truly the last.

The island narrows toward its point now. The twenty-second tower stands over Tribeca in the clean high light, breathing the simplest joy of all.

XXII. GLASS-AND-MILK

the Clear-Light Breath · Tribeca

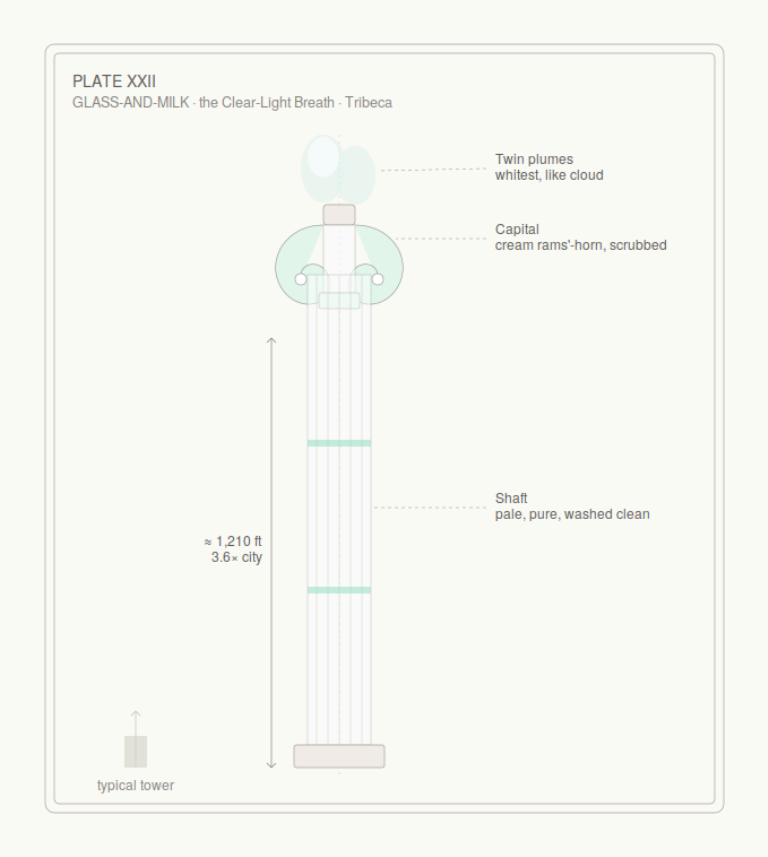


Plate XXII — architectural elevation

The twenty-second tower is the cleanest, and breathes the simplest joy on the island.

Glass-and-Milk stands over Tribeca in cream rams'-horn volutes, pale and pure, twin plumes rising from them straight and white, a tower that seems to have been washed — there is a clarity to them, a scrubbed quality, as though the air around them were a degree cleaner than the air anywhere else. Their smoke is the whitest, the most like actual cloud, and where it comes down the light goes clear and high and clean, the particular light of a certain kind of morning. In the community, Glass-and-Milk is the calm one, the one whose breath clears the air for the others, the tower the family turns to after the great exertions — after Riot's roar, after the gathered labor of a long smoke day — for the simple clean light in which everything can be seen plainly and nothing aches.

The joy is the joy of clean light through a high window.

The simplest of all the joys and the hardest to write about, because it is almost nothing: the morning light coming through a window you have washed, falling clean across a floor, full of slow dust, ordinary and complete. The first coffee in the clear light. The room that is, for once, in order, lit by a sun that has nothing to apologize for. It is the joy of clarity itself — of a moment with no

complication in it, no ache, no longing, no memory, just the plain good light and the clean window and the day arriving uncomplicated. Glass-and-Milk breathes the clear light. The simple morning. The joy that is just joy, with nothing underneath it, asking nothing, meaning nothing beyond itself.

It reaches the lofts and the high windows of Tribeca on the smoke mornings, where the light comes in clean and people stand in it a moment with their coffee before the day begins, washed.

It reaches Jun, who has been carrying a complicated grief — the kind that colors every light. I will not name the loss; Jun did not name it to me, and the not-naming was itself part of how they carried it, privately, without the relief of saying it aloud. But you know the kind of grief I mean, the kind that is not a single sharp event but a long discoloration, a tint that gets into everything, so that for months there is no such thing as a simple morning — every light comes filtered through the loss, every ordinary moment carries the small added weight of the thing that is gone, and you forget, after long enough, that light was ever just light, that a morning could ever be only a morning and not also an occasion for the grief to make itself felt again. Jun has been living in the tinted light for months. They have stopped expecting anything else; the tint has become the condition of seeing; they have forgotten that clarity is even available. On a smoke morning Jun wakes in their high Tribeca room, where the windows are large and face the east, and the light is coming in — and it is clean. For the first time in months the light is not filtered through the grief. It falls across the floor plain and high and white, full of slow turning dust, and it is just light, only light, uncomplicated, asking nothing, carrying nothing, meaning nothing beyond its own clean presence in the room. And Jun stands in it. They do not feel that the grief is gone — Glass-and-Milk does not work that crude a miracle, the loss is still the loss, the gone thing is still gone. What they feel is that the grief has, for one morning, set itself down. Stepped back. Allowed the light to be only light. And Jun stands in the clean clear morning light with their coffee, in a room that is for once just a room on a day that is for once just a day, and feels not the absence of grief but the return of clarity, the forgotten possibility of an uncomplicated moment, the plain good fact of light through a high window — and it is enough, it is more than enough, it is everything, because a person carrying a long grief does not need the grief erased, they need only, every so often, a single morning where the light is allowed to be clean, where they can remember that the world is still also just the world, still also simple, still also full of plain ordinary light that falls across a floor and asks nothing and gives everything. Jun drinks the coffee. The light moves slowly across the floor as the sun climbs. And for the length of that clean morning, the grief waits quietly in the next room, and lets Jun have the light.

It reaches the windows themselves, washed clean by the smoke, which is perhaps why the light comes through so clear.

Glass-and-Milk is the hardest tower to believe in and the easiest to love. Hard to believe because their joy is so simple it barely seems like a joy at all — clean light, a high window, an uncomplicated morning. We are trained to want our joys complex, earned, storied. But stand in the clean light Glass-and-Milk breathes and you will understand that the simple joy is not the lesser one. It is the one underneath all the others, the bedrock, the plain good fact of light and morning that the complicated joys are built upon and that we lose sight of precisely because it is always there.

Glass-and-Milk strips it back to nothing. Just the light. Just the window. Just the morning, clean. And it turns out that nothing, when it is the right nothing, is the most that can be given. The light is clean. You are here to see it. That is the joy. There is nothing underneath it because there does not need to be. And the community keeps Glass-and-Milk close to the end, near the bottom of the island, because after all the complicated joys — the leaning and the longing and the remembering and the roaring — what a family finally wants for its own is simply this: a clean morning, a high window, light that asks nothing, the plain good fact of being here to see it.

The island ends just south of here, comes to its point at the water, and there — where everything gathers, where the rivers finally agree to become the harbor and the harbor opens to the sea — stands the last of them, the largest, the twin, the one that takes all the other breaths and lets them go.

XXIII. OMEGA & THE HARBOR MOTHER

the Last Breath · The Battery

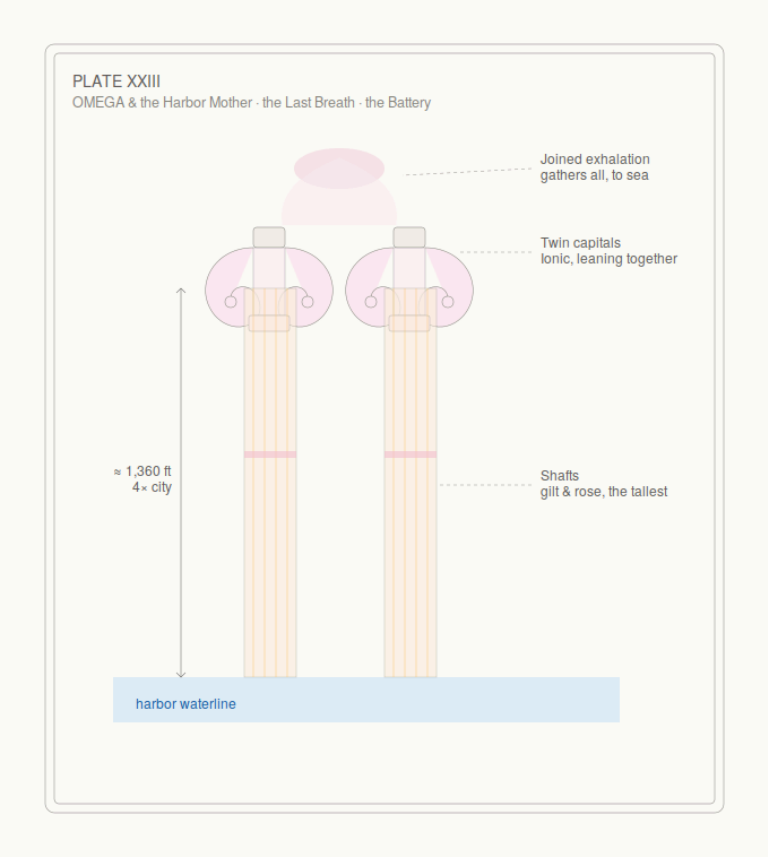


Plate XXIII — architectural elevation

The twenty-third tower is two towers and the tallest of them all, and they stand at the very tip of the island where the land gives out, and they breathe the joy that holds all the others.

Omega and the Harbor Mother rise over the Battery, twin Ionic capitals on grand gold-and-rose shafts, four times the height of the city behind them, the largest things human or otherwise on the entire island, and they stand at the edge of the water facing south, facing the harbor, facing the open sea beyond the Narrows where everything that has ever come to this island first appeared. Their twin exhalations rise and join, high up, into a single column of white that the whole harbor can see, that the ships read as they come in, that means — to anyone who has learned to read the smoke — you are arriving somewhere that breathes joy. They are the last tower and the first thing the newcomer sees. This is not an accident. Nothing about Omega is an accident. And they are two, twinned like Sisko and Sash far to the north, because the gathering of an entire island's joy is not work for a single tower — it takes two, leaning together, the way the heaviest things are always carried by more than one, the way a family carries its largest griefs and largest joys not on one back but on many.

The joy is the joy that gathers all the others and lets them go to sea.

It is the meta-joy, the joy of the whole. Walk the island north to south, as you have now walked it, and you collect them one by one — the first waking, the leaning, the stretch, the finished sentence, the dusk arrival, the borrowed song, the heaped plate, the shade, the recognized face, the received care, the singing room, the recovered name, the found money, the held door, the affirming gaze, the perfect coincidence, the kept secret, the idle hour, the roaring crowd, the given bread, the long memory, the clean light — twenty-two separate joys, gathered as you descend. And at the bottom, at the point, at the water, Omega takes them all. The Harbor Mother gathers every breath the island has taken and braids them into the single column that rises over the Narrows, and then — this is the part that took me longest to understand, and that I find I can barely write without stopping — and then they let it go. Out to sea. They do not hoard the joy. They do not even keep it on the island. They gather everything, the whole bright sentence of the place, and they breathe it out over the water, southward, outward, away, as a gift to whatever and whoever is out there, to the ships coming in and the world beyond the harbor and the open indifferent sea, freely, asking nothing, the way the baker gives the thirteenth roll, the way the grandmother heaps the plate, the way the tower leans.

It reaches the newcomers first, the ones arriving by water, who see the joined column of white rising over the island before they see anything else, and feel — before they have set foot, before they know a single street or face — that they are arriving somewhere that has decided, structurally, permanently, to breathe joy. Many of them weep at the rail and do not know why. It is Omega. It is the welcome. It is the whole island's gathered breath, sent out past the Narrows to meet them while they are still at sea. Consider one of them — there is always one, there have been millions, the book could be only their faces — a person arriving with everything they own in a single bag and nothing ahead of them but a name on a piece of paper and the enormous terrifying hope that drove them across the water. They have heard things about this place. They have heard it is hard, and cold, and indifferent, a place that grinds people down, a place where no one will know you or care whether you live. And they stand at the rail as the ship comes through the Narrows, braced for the hardness, and they see — rising over the far tip of the island, impossibly tall, gold and rose and crowned with a column of white that climbs into the sky and bends out toward them over the water — they see Omega. And they do not know what it is. They cannot read the smoke yet; that will come later, after years, after they have walked the island and collected the joys and learned the long conversation. But something in them reads it anyway, some older sense beneath knowing, and what they feel, at the rail, with everything they own in one bag, is that the things they heard were not the whole truth — that this place, whatever else it is, whatever hardness waits, has also raised an enormous tower at its threshold whose only purpose is to breathe joy out over the water to meet the frightened and the arriving, to say, before a single word of the hard language has been learned, welcome, you are arriving somewhere that breathes joy, you are not coming to a place that will only grind you, you are coming to a place that has built, at its very door, a monument to gladness and pointed it out to sea, at you. And they weep at the rail, and do not know why, and the not-knowing is part of the welcome.

It reaches the ones leaving, too, who look back at the receding column and carry the joy out into the world, scattering it, so that somewhere very far from here, years later, a person does a small kind

thing for a stranger and does not know that the impulse came, by the longest and most roundabout route, from a tower at the tip of an island breathing out over the water on a smoke morning.

It reaches me, last of all, standing at the Battery with the whole island at my back and all twenty-three of them lined up behind me north to south, the entire bright sentence legible at once, and Omega before me breathing it all out to sea — and I understand, finally, the thing the child on the train was asking, the thing I could not say in a sentence and have needed a whole book to approach: the smoke is not for anything. That was the wrong question, gently asked. The smoke is not for anything any more than a breath is for anything. The island breathes because it is alive, and what it breathes is joy because joy is what it has, and it sends the joy out to sea because that is what you do with joy, you do not keep it, you cannot keep it, it is not the kind of thing that can be kept — you gather it as you go, the whole length of your life, north to south, one joy at a time, and at the end you stand at the edge of the water and you breathe it all back out, freely, to whoever is arriving, to whoever is leaving, to the open sea, and that — that letting go, that final generous exhalation over the water — that is not the loss of the joy.

That is the joy.

And it reaches the towers themselves, all twenty-three of them, in the only moment of the day when the whole community breathes as one — because this is what they have been building toward since Áveline woke first in the north, this is the end of the long conversation, the place where the bucket line empties, where every joy passed down the island all day arrives at last and is breathed out together. Áveline's lonely sunrise and Quietude's held door and Rosa's witnessed life and Jun's clean light and every joy between, the whole bright sentence, gathered at the Battery and let go to sea by two towers leaning together — and as they breathe it out, the other twenty-one lean their smoke south toward the Harbor Mother, all of them, the whole family bending toward the bottom of the island to add their breath to the last great exhalation, so that what goes out over the Narrows is not Omega's breath alone but the breath of all of them, the entire community, the chosen family of the island emptying its gathered joy into the sea as a single act of love, and then turning — you can almost see it, on a smoke evening, if you stand at the Battery and look back up the island — turning to begin again, north to south, tomorrow, forever, because a family that breathes joy does not breathe it once, it breathes it daily, it gathers and gives and gathers again, and never once, in all the turning of the days, lets a single one of its own breathe alone.

— and here I put down the pen, at the bottom of the island, under the last and largest of them, with nothing left to explain and the whole bright row of them breathing behind me, north to south, the first waking to the last letting-go. You have walked it now. You have collected them. You have learned the secret of the conversation, that they are a community, that they take care of their own, that they breathe in the lineage of every chosen family that ever made radical joy on this island out of a city that told them to make it small. Go and stand at the Battery on a smoke morning and watch the whole family lean south and breathe the island out to sea, and then turn around and go back up the island and live, and be the twenty-fourth tower, the one that has not grown yet, the one that is you — and find your own family, and pass the breath down your own long table, and take care of your own, and never let one of them

breathe alone, and gather your joys as you go, all your life, north to south, and at the end breathe them all back out, freely, over whatever water you find yourself beside, to whoever is arriving, to whoever is leaving, to the open and waiting sea.

AFTERWORD

On Leaving the Smoke Behind

I finished this book at the Battery, as you know by now, with the Harbor Mother breathing the whole island out to sea in front of me and the whole bright row of them at my back, and I want to tell you what happened next, because it is the only ending the book can honestly have.

I turned around and went home.

That is the secret the towers spend twenty-three chapters teaching and that I could not learn until I had written all of them down: you cannot live at the Battery. You cannot stand forever at the point of the island in the full gathered breath of all twenty-three, weeping at the rail with the newcomers, dissolved in the total joy of the whole sentence spoken at once. It is too much. It is not meant to be lived in. The joy of the towers is not a place you move to. It is a breath you take, walking through, on your way somewhere — and then you go home, up the island, back into the ordinary clenched working days, carrying as much of it as a body can carry, which is never very much, and never needs to be.

Because here is the thing I understood, turning my back on Omega and walking north into the evening: the smoke is already inside you. You do not need to live at the Battery because you have walked the island now, you have collected them, all twenty-three, the first waking and the leaning and the stretch and the finished sentence and all the rest, down to the clean light and the letting-go — they are in you, the way a song you have heard all the way through is in you, retrievable, yours. The towers breathe so that you will learn the joys. And once you have learned them you do not need the towers. You become, yourself, a small tower. You hold the door — that is Quietude, breathing through you. You give the thirteenth roll — that is Pomme. You remember the old neighbor, you sing in the stairwell, you take the idle afternoon, you let yourself be seen, and each time you do, you breathe a little of the island's joy back out into the held-breath city, on your own, without any tower at all.

This is what the towers are for, if they are for anything, which I have decided they are not, but if they were: they are for teaching you to breathe like them, so that you can stop needing them.

The child on the train was right to ask, and right to be unsatisfied with every answer, because the true answer is not a sentence you can say. It is a thing you do. You walk the island. You collect the joys. You go home and you breathe them out again, one held door, one free loaf, one remembered name at a time, into the lives of the people around you, who do not know about the towers, who think it is simply a good day. They are right. It is simply a good day. You made it one. You are the twenty-fourth tower. You always were. You have not finished growing, and you never will, which is the best news in this entire book, because it means there is no Battery for you, no final gathered breath, no end — only the long bright walk down the island and back up it, again and again, breathing in the joy that is already happening and breathing it back out amplified, for as long as you are lucky enough to keep breathing at all.

Go home. The smoke is coming down. Somewhere above you a tower has just felt something good that you did, and is breathing, and you will never know which one, and it does not matter, and that not-mattering is the whole of the joy.

— S., at the Battery, and then at home, with the curtains open

CATALOGUE OF ARCHITECTURAL PLATES

Twenty-three plates, drawn from life by the author, north to south. Medium throughout: painted steel, gilt volute, rose-and-cream fluting, perpetual exhalation. Heights given as multiples of the surrounding city.

Plate I — Áveline · Inwood · *the First Breath.* Corinthian capital, gilt volutes, basket of acanthus; rose shaft, twin gold bands; ≈1,180 ft (3.5×). Exhalation rising true. The northmost and the first struck by morning.

(see also the measured elevation, Plate I, with its chapter)

Plate II — Térrace-Who-Leans · Fort George · *the Leaning Breath.* Double-volute capital tipped to the south; rose-and-cream shaft inclined 4° off true; ≈1,150 ft (3.4×). The lean is structural, not a fault.

(see also the measured elevation, Plate II, with its chapter)

Plate III — Miró of the Long Neck · Washington Heights · *the Stretching Breath.* Slender Ionic, small neat volutes; the thinnest shaft, pale rose to near-white, ringed in gold; ≈1,210 ft (3.6×). Reads as a throat perpetually lengthening.

(see also the measured elevation, Plate III, with its chapter)

Plate IV — Sisko & Sash · Hamilton Heights · *the Twinned Breath.* A single shaft bifurcating into two inward-facing gilt-scrolled capitals; ≈1,170 ft (3.5×). Drawn always as a pair; will not be separated.

(see also the measured elevation, Plate IV, with its chapter)

Plate V — Vesper · Morningside · *the Dusk Breath.* Ionic, great ram's-horn volutes, gold and rose; ≈1,240 ft (3.7×). Breathes only at dusk; silent by day, by discipline.

(see also the measured elevation, Plate V, with its chapter)

Plate VI — Jubilée · Harlem · *the Borrowed-Music Breath.* Cream Corinthian crown, billowing; the widest exhalation, spilling rather than rising; ≈1,200 ft (3.6×). The most extroverted of the towers.

(see also the measured elevation, Plate VI, with its chapter)

Plate VII — Pimentó · East Harlem · *the Overfed Breath.* Rose spiral capital, warm-toned, coiled tight; the shaft holds a flush; ≈1,160 ft (3.4×). Smells faintly of a kitchen at the right hour.

(see also the measured elevation, Plate VII, with its chapter)

Plate VIII — Fern · Central Park North · *the Shade Breath.* White Ionic, twin scrolls, an unexplained elbow-pipe in the upper works; ≈1,190 ft (3.5×). Smoke settles low and cool; the city's green lung.

(see also the measured elevation, Plate VIII, with its chapter)

Plate IX — Columbine · Upper West Side · *the Recognition Breath.* Rose shaft, gold rings, outward-facing alert scrolls; ≈1,180 ft (3.5×). Smoke moves in eddies, like attention through a crowd.

(see also the measured elevation, Plate IX, with its chapter)

Plate X — Dowager Pearl · Upper East Side · *the Doted-On Breath.* Pearl-pink rolled volutes wrapped in floral bands; the most ornamented capital; ≈1,200 ft (3.6×). Smoke fine as powder.

(see also the measured elevation, Plate X, with its chapter)

Plate XI — Aria · Lincoln Square · *the Resonant Breath.* Pink-and-gold acanthus; proportioned like an instrument; clean columnar exhalation, a held note; ≈1,220 ft (3.6×).

(see also the measured elevation, Plate XI, with its chapter)

Plate XII — Meridian · Midtown West · *the Noon Breath.* Cream-and-gold double scroll with an antenna-gnomon alongside; ≈1,230 ft (3.7×). Breathes once daily, at solar noon.

(see also the measured elevation, Plate XII, with its chapter)

Plate XIII — Gilt · Midtown East · *the Found-Money Breath.* Tall gold fluted shaft, the most golden of all; pink capital above; ≈1,210 ft (3.6×). Smoke catches and scatters light.

(see also the measured elevation, Plate XIII, with its chapter)

Plate XIV — Quietude · Murray Hill · *the Courtesy Breath.* Pale Corinthian, soft pink volutes; the most modest capital; the lightest exhalation, a thin pale ribbon; ≈1,150 ft (3.4×).

(see also the measured elevation, Plate XIV, with its chapter)

Plate XV — Proud Mary-of-the-Piers · Chelsea · *the Seen Breath.* Rose Ionic, gold acanthus; struck broadside by harbor light, the most visibly lit; ≈1,190 ft (3.5×). Smoke streams toward the water, a banner.

(see also the measured elevation, Plate XV, with its chapter)

Plate XVI — Sibyl · Flatiron · *the Coincidence Breath.* Swollen pink-and-cream double scroll; resolves head-on into a knowing face; ≈1,170 ft (3.5×). Twin smoke-streams that cross and braid.

(see also the measured elevation, Plate XVI, with its chapter)

Plate XVII — Locket · Gramercy · *the Secret Breath.* Pink-and-yellow capital with a glass drum set in the upper works, like a watch-crystal; ≈1,160 ft (3.4×). Smoke contained, a discreet curl.

(see also the measured elevation, Plate XVII, with its chapter)

Plate XVIII — Fig · Greenwich Village · *the Idle Breath.* Paired pink-and-gold Ionic, relaxed proportions, soft harbor light; ≈1,170 ft (3.5×). Smoke lazes and pools, taking its time.

(see also the measured elevation, Plate XVIII, with its chapter)

Plate XIX — Riot · East Village · *the Crowd Breath.* Molten gold-and-pink capitals, caught mid-motion; the most kinetic plate; ≈1,200 ft (3.6×). Smoke surges in exuberant bursts.

(see also the measured elevation, Plate XIX, with its chapter)

Plate XX — Pomme · SoHo · *the Baker's Breath.* White-and-gold rolled scrolls, twinned and plump, glazed as fresh bread; ≈1,180 ft (3.5×). Smoke warm and faintly sweet.

(see also the measured elevation, Plate XX, with its chapter)

Plate XXI — Delancey (the Tenement Saint) · Lower East Side · *the Old-Neighbor Breath.* Pink-and-gold Ionic pair, weathered, contrails behind; ≈1,190 ft (3.5×). The patina of long residence.

(see also the measured elevation, Plate XXI, with its chapter)

Plate XXII — Glass-and-Milk · Tribeca · *the Clear-Light Breath.* Cream rams'-horn volutes, pale and scrubbed; twin white plumes, straight and pure; ≈1,210 ft (3.6×). The whitest smoke, most like cloud.

(see also the measured elevation, Plate XXII, with its chapter)

Plate XXIII — Omega & the Harbor Mother · The Battery · *the Last Breath.* Twin Ionic capitals on grand gold-and-rose shafts; the tallest, ≈1,360 ft (4×). Twin exhalations join into one column over the Narrows. Gathers all; lets all go to sea.

(see also the measured elevation, Plate XXIII, with its chapter)

COLOPHON

The Breath of the Island was set in a face the author insists was cut from the smoke itself and cooled into letters, which the printers dispute. The twenty-three plates were drawn from life at the risk of the author's neck, from helicopters, rooftops, and one memorable cherry-picker. The map was corrected against the towers and not against the surveyors, on the principle that the towers were here first.

Printed north to south.

First edition. There will be others; there is always another, the way there is always another tower, the way there is always another breath.

— *S.*

BOOK FOUR · THE LONG MORNING

THE CURTAIN THAT WALKS

◇ ◆ ◇

A Novella of Radical Joy

a single track up the spine of the island,
fourteen stops, one long day

"The grey mornings keep coming
and so does the yellow.
That is the deal. That is the whole deal,
and it is a good deal, the best deal,
and I would not trade it for a world with no grey mornings,
because a world with no grey mornings
would be a world with no need for yellow."

— the curtain, in the last chapter

THE CURTAIN THAT WALKS

A Novella of Radical Joy

a novella by

Surjan

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Foreword

It is a rare thing to be handed a book that insists, from its first yellow page, that you are allowed to be happy. Not happy later, not happy once the work is finished and the worry is folded away, but happy now, in the middle of the unfinished day. This is that book.

I first met Surjan's work the way most people meet weather — by walking out into it. There was a drawing pinned to a studio wall: a colossal yellow curtain hanging over a city, and beneath its scalloped hem a thin bright band of life, so small you had to lean in, so alive you forgot to lean back out. I stood there longer than was polite. When I finally turned around, the ordinary room had become a little more possible than it had been before.

That is the whole trick of Surjan, if a generosity this large can be called a trick. The buildings are alive here. They speak to one another across avenues. They lift and lower a curtain the size of a feeling and put on a play that never ends and is never the same twice. And walking the length of the island, threading the cables, oiling the track, sweeping the mirror-pool clean each morning, is a child — the curtain-keeper — who is the reader's age, whatever age the reader happens to be.

Everyone in these pages is genderqueer and non-binary, including the author, and I want to say plainly why that matters to the joy and is not merely decoration on it. A city that has decided its architecture is alive has already decided that the categories were never the point. The point was always the aliveness. The point was always whether the thing in front of you — a tower, a person, a curtain — is permitted to be exactly and abundantly itself, and to be loved for it, out loud, in yellow. Surjan's Manhattan has decided yes. So has Surjan. So, by the last plate, have I.

Read this slowly if you can. Read it to someone. Read it on a grey day especially, because that is the day it was built for. The curtain is already moving up the island as you open the cover. It would be a shame to miss the scene it is about to lift its hem upon — which is, of course, the one you are standing in.

I have read the manuscript four times now, and each time a different stop has undone me, which is how I know it is alive. The first time it was the tall ones bowing; I had not expected a book of such determined joy to understand loneliness so exactly, and the image of the dignified tower leaning down forty floors to hear a child stayed with me for weeks. The second time it was the flower wall at Grand Central, and its secret of stations — that you are not a vessel that empties when it gives but a channel that flows — which is the truest thing I have read about the cost and the not-cost of generosity in many years, in or out of fiction. The third time, the round ones at Central Park South. The fourth time, the small thing the keeper says at the very end, directly to the reader, about the grey morning; but I

will not spoil it; you will arrive there yourself, and it will, I suspect, be waiting for whatever you happen to be carrying that day.

What I want to prepare you for, before you begin, is the book's central and deceptively simple claim, because everything else rests on it and it is easy to read past on the first page. The claim is this: that the joy was always already there. The curtain, the keeper insists again and again, adds nothing. It does not manufacture delight or import it from somewhere brighter. It only frames what is already true — holds an edge of attention around the joy that is already scattered through every neighborhood, going to waste for lack of a frame — and the framing is the whole of the magic, because a framed joy becomes visible, and a visible joy becomes shareable, and a shared joy becomes a song. This is not a book about a magical curtain that makes a sad city happy. It is a book about a city that was always capable of its own happiness and only needed to be taught to look. The distinction matters more than any other in these pages, and the author knows it, and builds the entire ascent of the island around it, stop by stop, until the finale makes it unmistakable.

— from the Foreword

Introduction

I should tell you how the curtain began, since people always ask, and since the true answer is better than the one they expect.

They expect me to say it began as a sketch, or a grief, or a grand idea about cities. It began as a piece of yellow. I had a square of paper the exact color of the inside of a lemon, and I held it up against the window one grey morning, and the whole grey morning behind it turned warm. Nothing about the morning had changed. Only that I had put something yellow between myself and it, and chosen to look through the yellow. That is the entire philosophy of this book, and I have spent a year and a great deal of glass and steel and rendered light saying it more slowly.

So here is what I built, and how, because I believe in telling you how the magic is done. Every image in this book I conceived, modeled in three dimensions, and rendered myself. I built the curtain in Rhino, panel by panel, until it hung the way a real curtain hangs — heavy at the hem, breathing at the top. I built the track it travels on. I built the tiny cast, the balloon-creatures and the lantern-clusters and the alphabet of small red letters, and I lit them and let them cast their small honest shadows into the mirror-pool. None of the pictures were made by a machine dreaming on my behalf. They were made by me, on purpose, for you.

The words are a different matter, and I want to be honest about that too. The words I wrote in conversation — with an artificial intelligence as my co-author, the way one writes with a patient friend who never tires and never takes the pen entirely. I am the author. The voice is mine, the cast is mine, the city is mine, the insistence on joy is very much mine. But the labor of sentences was shared, and it would be a small lie of pride to pretend otherwise. I am the creator of the context. That is the role I claim, and it is enough.

Now, the curtain itself. It is not a building. This confuses people who want it to stay still. It travels. It rides a single long track up the spine of Manhattan, from the Battery to the Great Lawn, and at each stop it pauses, and lifts its scalloped hem, and the neighborhood it has stopped in wakes up and performs. The buildings are the performers. They have been waiting, some of them for a hundred years, for a stage and a permission, and the curtain brings both. The play has no script and no ending. It is improvised nightly by the architecture and witnessed by whoever happens to be alive nearby, which is everyone.

And I am in it, small, near the bottom of every plate, with my broom and my ring of keys. I keep the curtain. I do not own it — you cannot own a thing that large and that happy — but I oil the track and untangle the cables and sweep the mirror-pool, and in exchange I get to ride the whole length of the island inside the best secret there is, which is that the city is glad to be here. That gladness is the play. This book is the catalogue of one full performance, one

walk from the harbor to the green, fourteen stops, fourteen scenes, one curtain, one keeper, and a whole island of radical joy. Come up the track with me. Mind the cables. Here is the first stop.

Let me say a little more about the cast, since they will be your companions for the length of the island and you deserve a proper introduction. They are not characters in the usual sense; they do not have names or backstories or arcs; they are shapes, mostly — the pink one with the round surprised face, the green one always halfway through a sentence, the small red letters that spell nothing, the two white circles that travel together. I made them this way on purpose. I wanted a cast that could not be reduced to explanation, that you would come to love not for what they had been through or what they wanted but simply for how they are, the way you love the particular shapes of the people you love long before and long after you could say anything useful about their histories. The cast is an alphabet of gladness. Each one is a single letter of it. Together they spell things the keeper feels and cannot otherwise say.

And let me say, because I have been asked and will be asked again, why everyone in this book — the keeper, the cast, the wakened buildings, and I, the author — is genderqueer and non-binary, and why I have not made this a source of conflict or struggle anywhere in the story, when stories about people like us so often turn on exactly that struggle. I left the struggle out on purpose. Not because it is not real — it is real, I have lived it, many of us have — but because I wanted, for the length of one yellow book, to build a world where it had already been won, so completely that it had soaked down into the architecture, into the curtain, into the light itself. A world where being exactly and abundantly yourself is so thoroughly assumed that no one in the entire city would think to remark on it, any more than they would remark on the buildings being alive. I wanted to give us, for once, not a story about earning the right to exist, but a story that simply begins after that right is settled, and goes on to the next thing, which is joy. The radical part of radical joy, for people like us, is sometimes just being allowed to skip to the joy.

— Surjan

The Novella

The Yellow Curtain

fourteen stops, from the Battery to the Great Lawn

1. The Curtain Wakes

THE BATTERY

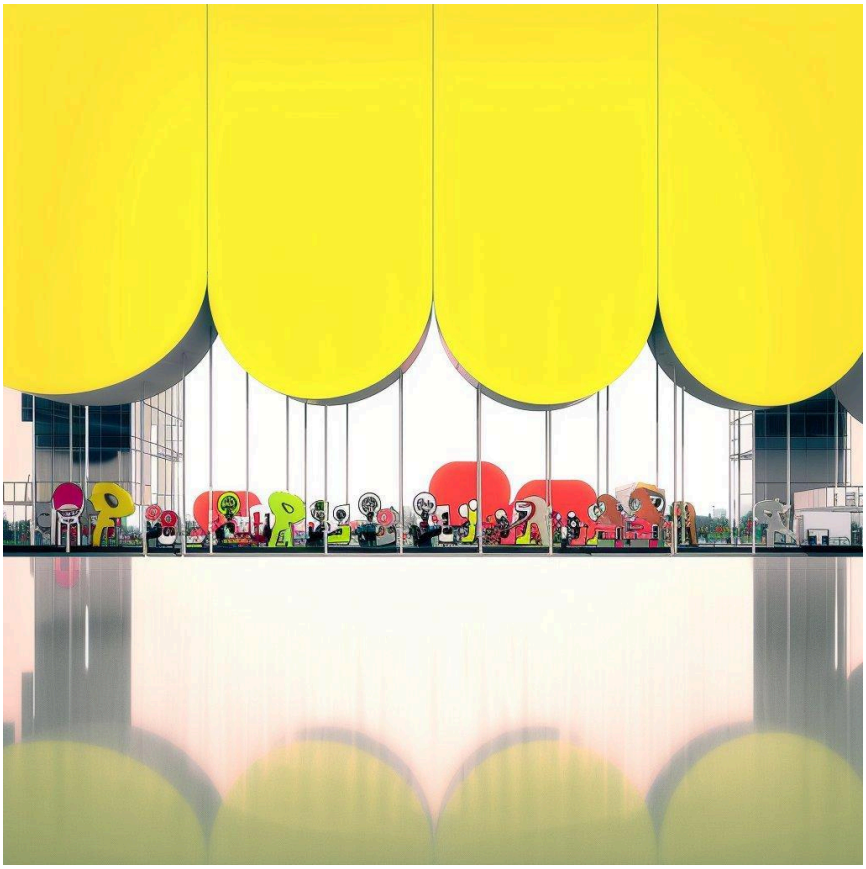

Plate 1

The curtain sleeps at the bottom of the island, in the green at the Battery where the land runs out and the water begins, and that is where I wake it. I have done this every morning for as long as I can remember being a keeper, and I do it the same way each time, because the curtain is enormous and old and kind, and enormous old kind things like to be woken the same way. I walk out along the track with my broom over my shoulder. I knock three times on the lowest panel, which is the color of a school bus and twice as tall as the tallest thing you have ever knocked on. I say good morning. And then I wait.

Waiting is part of it. People think the magic is in the knocking, but the magic is in the waiting, in the small grey moment after you have asked a large thing to wake and before it decides to. The harbor is silver at that hour. The gulls are conducting their small unimportant arguments over nothing, the way they do, the way I love. The water slaps the seawall in no particular rhythm. And the curtain hangs there, vast and still, the way a sail hangs before the wind has made up its mind, and I stand at its hem with my heart doing the

thing it does every single morning, which is to wonder, just for a breath, whether today is the day it will not wake at all.

It always wakes. I want to tell you that plainly, because I do not want you to spend this whole book afraid. In all my mornings it has never once failed to wake. But I want you to know about the breath of wondering, because the breath of wondering is what makes the waking matter. If you were certain, every morning, that the enormous kind thing would wake, you would stop saying good morning to it. You would stop knocking. You would walk past it the way the city walks past everything it has decided to be certain of, and the curtain would feel that, and one morning, out of sheer loneliness, it really might not wake. So I keep the breath of wondering. It is the rent I pay.

And then it wakes. The hem shivers first, the way your own skin shivers when a good idea arrives, when someone says a true thing you were not ready for, when the music does the part you have been waiting the whole song for. The shiver runs the length of the lowest panel and up into the great body of the yellow, and the curtain lifts itself a hand's width off the grass — just a hand's width, no more, that is all it takes — and underneath, in the bright thin band between the hem and the ground, the whole cast is revealed, already awake, already leaning toward the day like a row of sunflowers that heard the sun come up before it did.

There they are, all in a row beneath the yellow. I love them so much I have to look at them one at a time or it is too much at once. The little red letters that spell nothing and mean everything, leaning shoulder to shoulder. The pink one with the round surprised face who looks, every morning, as though the morning is the first morning there has ever been. The green one who is always halfway through a sentence and never minds being interrupted because there is always more sentence where that came from. The orange round-bellied one. The two small white circles that travel everywhere together and have never, in all my mornings, been apart. Someone has set out the day's lanterns already. Someone is tuning a drum, testing it with one knuckle, frowning, testing it again.

They see me. They always see me. And they do the thing they do, which I have tried a hundred times to describe and will try once more for you: they lift their small arms, all of them at once, in a gesture that is not quite a wave and not quite applause and is not quite reaching and is really just the physical shape of being glad that another one of us has arrived. If you have ever walked into a room and had everyone in it look up and be visibly, uncomplicatedly happy that the person who walked in was you — then you know the gesture, and you know that most people go years between such rooms, and you know what it would do to a person to receive that gesture every single morning of their life. It has made me brave. That is what it has done. A person who is met like that each morning can do almost anything by afternoon.

“Where today,” asks the pink one, who asks this every morning and loves the answer every morning as if it were brand new, because to the pink one it is brand new; the pink one keeps nothing overnight but its own gladness, and wakes each day an empty bright bowl waiting to be filled.

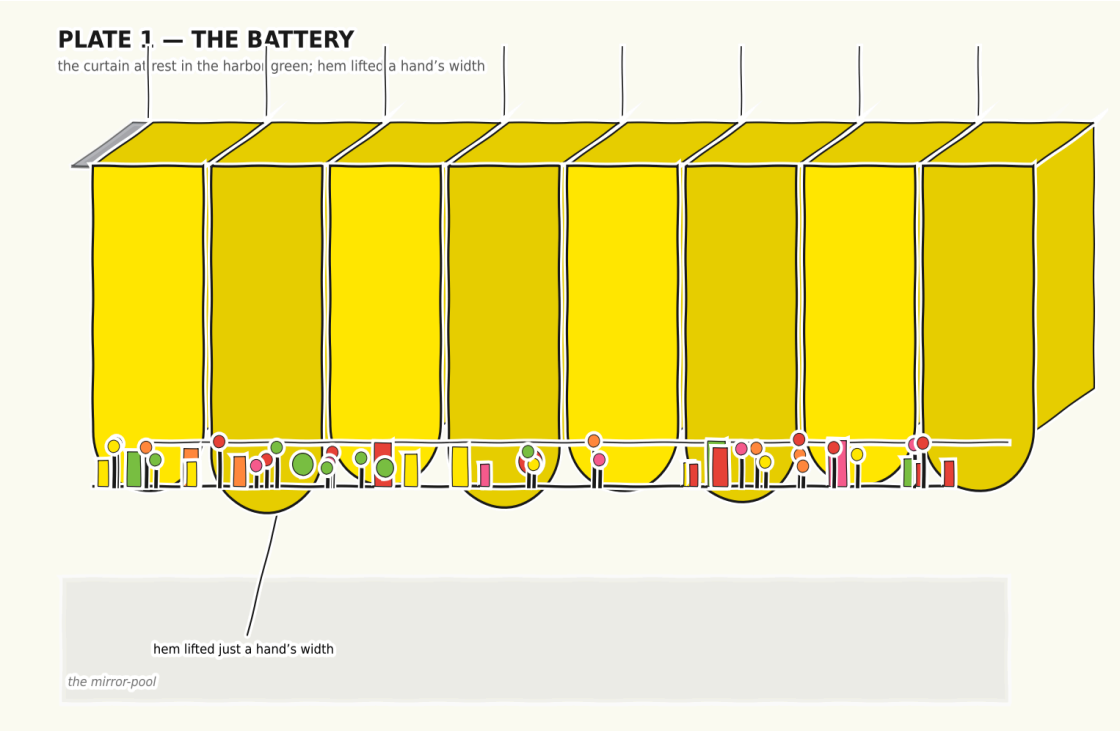
PLATE 1 — THE BATTERY
the curtain at rest in the harbor green; hem lifted a hand's width
hem lifted just a hand's width
the mirror-pool

Elevation oblique — the curtain's configuration at The Battery

“Up,” I say. “All the way up. Battery to the green. The whole island, the long way, the way that takes all day.”

And the cast makes the sound they make for that, which I cannot spell, but which you have made yourself, on the morning of a trip you have wanted for a long time, when someone older and trusted finally says yes, we are going, get your shoes, it is today. It is a sound with running in it. It is a sound with the whole unspent day folded up inside it like a sail. The green one starts a sentence about it and does not finish. The two white circles spin once around each other. The drum, finally tuned, says one round confident note, and the note hangs in the silver morning and does not fade so much as walk off up the island ahead of us, scouting.

Here is a thing I have learned about beginnings, standing at this hem on all these mornings. A beginning is not the moment something starts. A beginning is the moment everyone agrees to start together. The curtain was awake. The cast was awake. I was awake, broom on my shoulder, keys on my belt. But we did not begin until the pink one asked and I answered and the cast made the running sound — until all of us, at once, turned and faced

the same long day. That is the beginning. You can be awake for hours and not have begun. Most of the city, at this hour, is awake and has not begun. They are waiting, though they would not say so, for someone to ask where today, and someone else to say up, all the way up. I get to be both, most mornings. It is the best job on the island.

The curtain settles its hem back down over the cast, gently, the way you tuck a secret in for safekeeping, the way you fold a blanket back over someone who is not done sleeping but is about to be. Not to hide them — to carry them. The whole point of the hem is that it can carry the bright band of life from stop to stop without spilling it, and lift again at the next neighborhood with everyone still in their places, still leaning toward the day. I check the track. I oil the one wheel that always wants oiling, the third from the front, which has wanted oiling since before I was keeper and will want it after. I coil the loose cable. I take one last look at the harbor, silver and arguing and full of the particular light that only the bottom of the island gets, the light that comes off the water twice, once down and once back up.

I have not told you my name, and I am not going to, and I want to explain why, because it is not a secret and it is not a game. I do not tell you my name because the keeper is not a who so much as a what — a role, a doing, a standing-at-the-hem-each-morning — and a role does better without a name pinning it to one body. There have been keepers before me. There will be keepers after. We do not look alike; we are not the same age or the same kind; the only thing we share is the broom and the keys and the knocking and the breath of wondering. If I told you my name you might think the keeper had to be me, this particular one, and then when I am gone you might think the keeping stopped. It does not stop. The name that matters is the curtain's, and the curtain's name is the whole book, and you are reading it.

People ask me, too, whether I get lonely, a child traveling all day with a curtain and a cast of shapes, and the honest answer is that I did not understand the question for a long time, because the cast is the least lonely company there is. The pink one with the round surprised face does not make conversation the way people make conversation, full of weather and complaint and the careful trading of small unimportant facts. The pink one simply asks where today and is glad of the answer. The green one starts sentences and abandons them like a generous host who has put out far more food than anyone can eat. The two white circles travel together and ask nothing of me at all. It is the easiest company in the world, the company of the cast, because none of them want me to be anything other than the keeper, and the keeper is the one thing I already am, all the way down, with nothing left over to perform.

And then the track hums. You feel it before you hear it, in the soles of your feet, a low glad note that is the curtain's own version of the cast's running sound. We begin to move.

Behind us the harbor keeps its silver and its gulls and its arguing, and it is not sad to see us go, because the harbor knows we come back; we always come back; the bottom of the island is where the curtain sleeps and you always return to where you sleep. But ahead — ahead the whole grey morning of the city is waiting to be looked at through yellow, and you already know, you have known since the first page, what that does to a grey morning. It does not change the morning. It changes the looking. And the looking, it turns out, was always the part we could change. Mind the cables. Here is the first stop, which is the second thing, because the Battery was the waking and the waking is never counted. Up we go.

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2. The Tall Ones Bow

WALL STREET

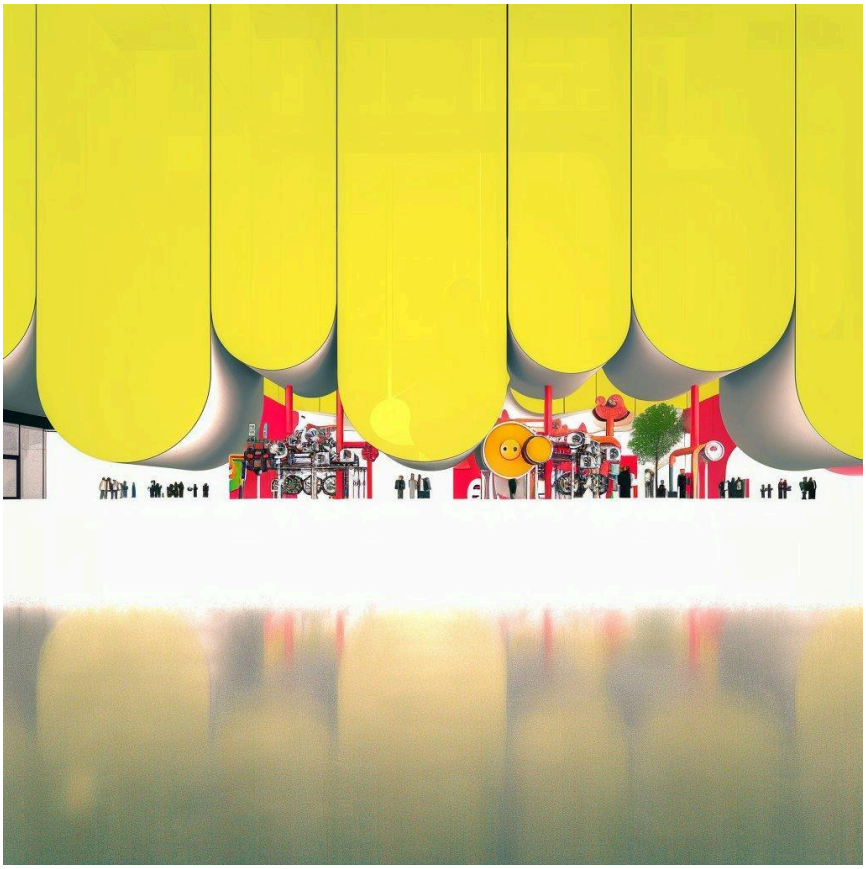


Plate 2

The first true stop is among the tall serious ones, the towers of Wall Street, who have a reputation, well earned, for never bending. They are very tall and very narrow and they were built by people who believed that money was a kind of weather you could survive only by standing up perfectly straight and never, ever flinching. For a hundred years the tall ones have stood up straight and not flinched. It has made them magnificent. It has also made them lonely, in the specific way that things which never flinch are lonely, because nobody embraces a thing that is braced, and the tall ones have been braced for a century.

The track carries us into the canyon between them, and the light changes the way it always changes here — goes narrow and grey and vertical, sliced into long cold strips by all that standing-straight stone. The cast feels it. I feel them feel it. The green one stops mid-sentence for once. The pink one's round face goes from surprised to something quieter. Even the drum holds its note. We have been to Wall Street before, of course — the route is always the same route — but you never quite get used to the cold strips of light, and I would worry about a keeper who did.

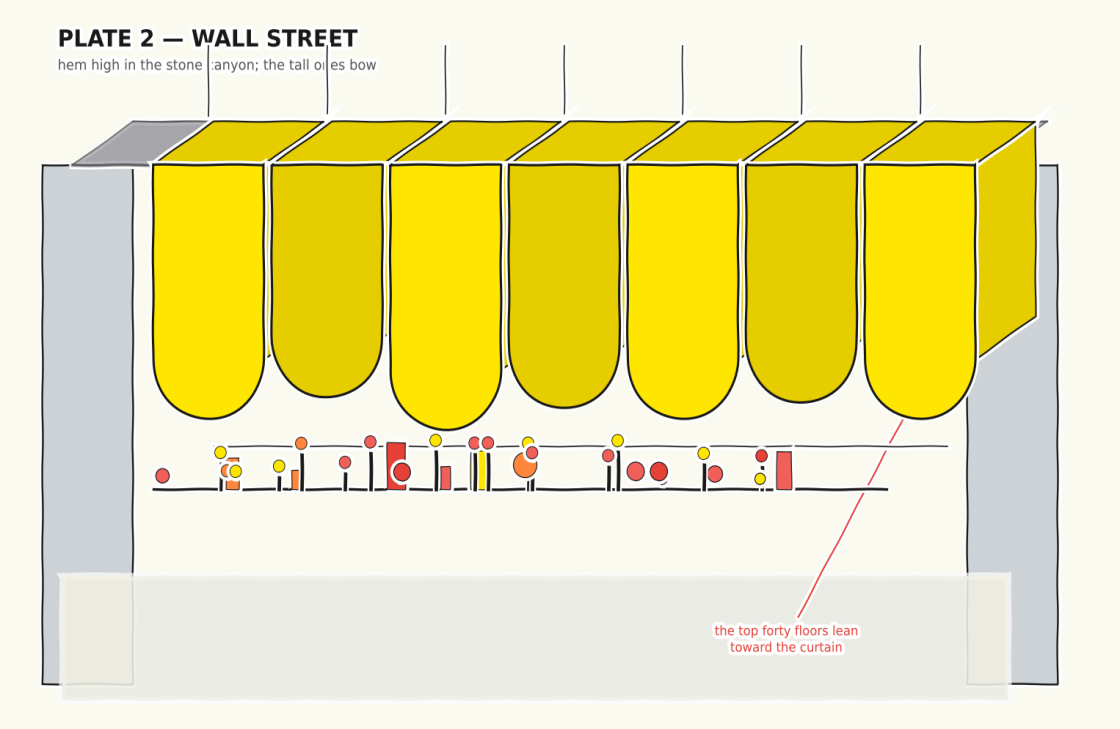
The curtain stops in the canyon and I hold my breath, the morning's second breath of wondering, because I never know with the serious ones. Some mornings they are not ready. Some mornings the curtain lifts its hem and the tall ones simply stand there, braced, unable to remember how to be anything but braced, and we wait a while and then move on and try again another day, and that is all right, that is allowed, you cannot rush a hundred years. But this morning, when the hem lifts — high here, much higher than at the Battery, the curtain seems to know the tall ones need room — this morning something is different. This morning they have been waiting for us.

Underneath the high hem the cast tumbles out small and impossibly bright against all that grey stone. The machines with their cheerful round gauges go rolling across the plaza. The little crowds in their dark coats — the real people, the morning commuters, who do not see the curtain the way I see it but feel it the way everyone feels it, as a sudden inexplicable lift in an ordinary Tuesday — the little crowds slow down. And a single orange disc rolls out from under the hem on its edge, all the way across the plaza, wobbling, gathering speed, and comes to rest spinning at the very foot of the tallest tower, like a coin that has thought it over and decided to be a sun instead.

And then the tall one does the thing it has not done in a hundred years. It bows.

Not far. It is not built to bend far; the people who made it made sure of that. But the top forty floors of the tallest tower lean, just perceptibly, just enough that you would see it if you were watching, toward the curtain and the small spinning orange sun at its foot — the way a very dignified elder, who has not bent down in years and whose joints have long since decided bending is for other people, leans down anyway, slowly, with great care, to hear what a small child is trying to tell them. The whole canyon seems to inhale. I have seen the curtain do a great many things to a great many buildings. I have never seen anything like the tall one bowing. It costs it something. You can see that it costs it something. That is what makes it the most beautiful thing on the block.

“We did not know we were allowed,” says the tall one, in the low voice that tall buildings have, the voice you feel in the soles of your feet before you hear it in your ears, the same place you felt the track hum. “All this time. We thought standing straight was the whole of it. We thought if we bent even once, even a little, we would lose the thing that made us worth building. We have been so careful. We have been careful for a hundred years.”



Elevation oblique — the curtain's configuration at Wall Street

"You were always allowed," I tell it, and I say it gently, because a hundred years of being careful is not undone by being told it was unnecessary; that only makes it worse; that only adds the grief of wasted carefulness on top of the carefulness. So I do not say it was unnecessary. I say: "You were always allowed. You were just never asked. There is a difference. Standing straight kept you up. That was real work and it mattered and you did it well. But nobody ever came and asked you to bow, and a thing will not do, on its own, the thing nobody has asked it to do, however much it longs to. You were not wrong to wait to be asked. You were only waiting. The curtain came to ask. That is the whole of what the curtain is for."

The orange disc spins at the tower's foot, showing off now, wobbling in tight bright circles, and the tower watches it the way you watch something young and free that is not at all worried about weather, that has never once considered that the sky might fall and has therefore left itself entirely available for delight — and something in the grey stone, some clenched thing forty floors up that has been clenched since the building was a drawing, unclenches. I feel it unclench. The whole canyon feels warmer by a degree that no instrument would measure but every coat on the plaza loosens by one button.

The little crowds look up. This is my favorite part of this stop, and I watch for it every time. The commuters in their dark coats have walked past this tower ten thousand times, headphones in, eyes down, walking the walk of people who have decided the city is certain and therefore not worth looking at. They have never once seen it bow. And now, because the

orange sun is spinning and the curtain is up and the morning has lifted in a way they cannot name, they look up — and they catch it. The lean. The bow. They put their hands over their mouths, not in fear, in the other thing, the thing you do when you witness dignity discovering delight, when you see a serious person laugh for the first time, when the strict teacher turns out to dance. One of them, a young one, sits right down on the cold plaza steps and just looks up, coat and all, briefcase forgotten, and does not move for a long time, and I love that one especially, and I hope they were not too late for wherever the dark coat was taking them, and I suspect they no longer cared.

"What do I do now," the tower asks me, and there is something almost shy in the great low voice, the shyness of an elder who has just done a new thing in public and is not sure of the etiquette. "Now that I have bowed. Do I — do I stand back up? Do I stay like this? I do not know the rules for after the bowing."

"There are no rules for after," I say. "That is the whole secret of after. You stay as bent or as straight as feels true, and you change it whenever you like, and nobody is keeping score, least of all the curtain. You could stand all the way back up tomorrow and that would be fine. You could stay bent forever and that would be fine. You could bow a little to one building and straight to another. The point was never the bow. The point was that you can. That you were always able to, and now you know it, and knowing it, you are free, which is a heavier and better thing than standing straight ever was."

The tall one considers this. You can feel it considering, all hundred years and forty floors of it, turning the new freedom over the way you turn a key you have just been given to a door you did not know was yours. And then it does the bravest thing of the whole morning: it stays bent. It chooses to stay bent, here, in the canyon, in front of the other tall ones who have not yet been asked and who are watching their tallest sibling with an expression I can only call hope. The orange sun spins. The crowds sit on the steps. The curtain holds the scene a long, long moment, longer than at any stop so far, because the curtain knows that the other tall ones are watching and learning that bowing is survivable, that you can bend and not break, that the weather of money is not the only weather and perhaps never was.

Then we move on. We have twelve stops to go and a whole island to wake and the day, though long, is not infinite. But I look back, the way I always look back, and the tallest tower is still bent, still leaning into the space where the orange sun was, and one of the other tall ones — the second tallest, the one that has stood straightest longest — is leaning too, just barely, just beginning, just trying it. They will not fully straighten again, I think. I do not think they want to. And the next time a young one in a dark coat walks through that canyon with their eyes down and their certainty up, the tall ones will be bent above them, waiting, ready, and maybe that one too will look up. That is how it spreads. Not all at once. One bow

at a time, one looking-up at a time, one ordinary Tuesday at a time, until the whole cold canyon has learned to lean.

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3. The Cast-Iron Children

TRIBECA

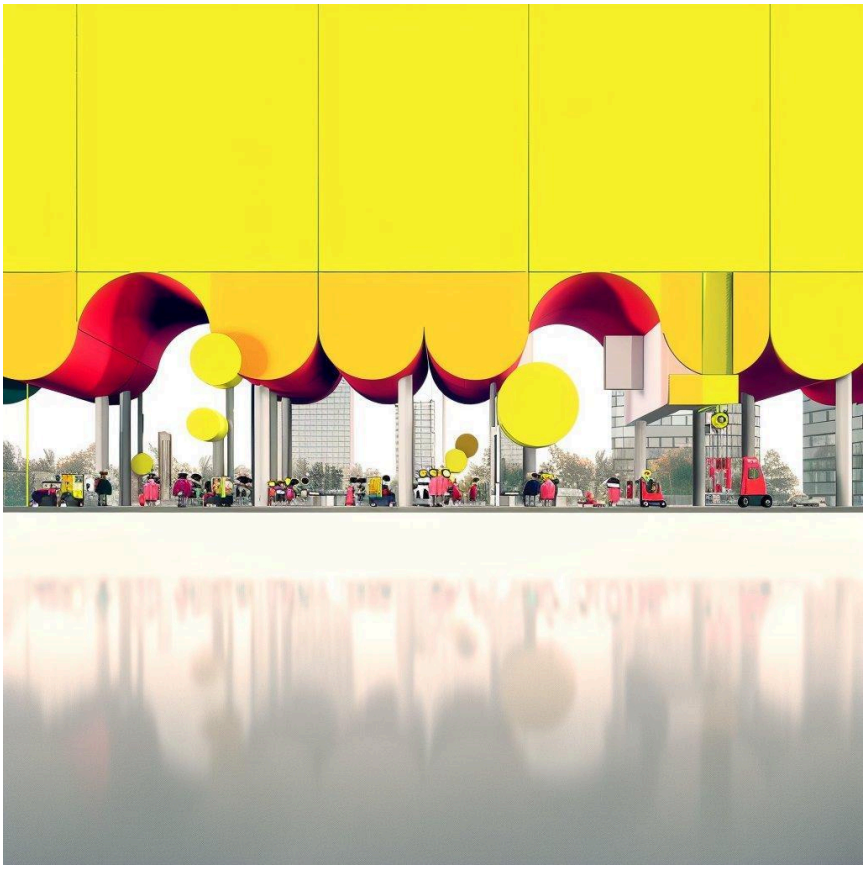


Plate 3

Tribeca is where the buildings are made of cast iron painted the colors of candy — deep cherry red, butter yellow, the white of the inside of an almond — and they are old, older than the tall ones in some cases, but they have the temperaments of children, and I have thought a long time about why, and here is what I have decided. Cast iron remembers being poured. It remembers being hot and liquid and able to become any shape at all, a railing or a column or a curl or a star, and it never quite gets over the disappointment of having to cool down and hold one shape forever. So it stays a little molten on the inside. It stays ready to become something else. And readiness to become something else, in a building or a person, is the truest definition of childhood I know.

So when the curtain lifts its hem here — and it lifts it in waves at this stop, the hem rising and dipping and rising again, scalloped like the edge of a shell, because the cast-iron ones cannot bear a straight line and the curtain indulges them — when the hem lifts, the buildings practically fall out into the scene. They do not wait to be asked the way the tall ones waited. They have been pressed against the inside of the hem all the way up from the

Battery, jostling, whispering, and the moment there is room they come tumbling. The red ones roll forward on their rounded bottoms like weighted toys that always come back upright no matter how hard you push them, which is, when you think about it, the single most hopeful piece of engineering ever devised: a thing built so that falling over is only ever temporary.

The yellow discs spin. There are figures in pink among them, and figures pushing small bright carts piled with I-have-never-been-sure-what, and the whole stop has the exact quality of a recess that the grown buildings have been waiting all century to be let out into. You know the feeling. The bell rings and the door opens and the held-in day comes pouring out onto the blacktop, and for fifteen minutes the rules are different, and the fifteen minutes are worth the whole rest of the day. Tribeca is fifteen minutes of recess that has learned how to last.

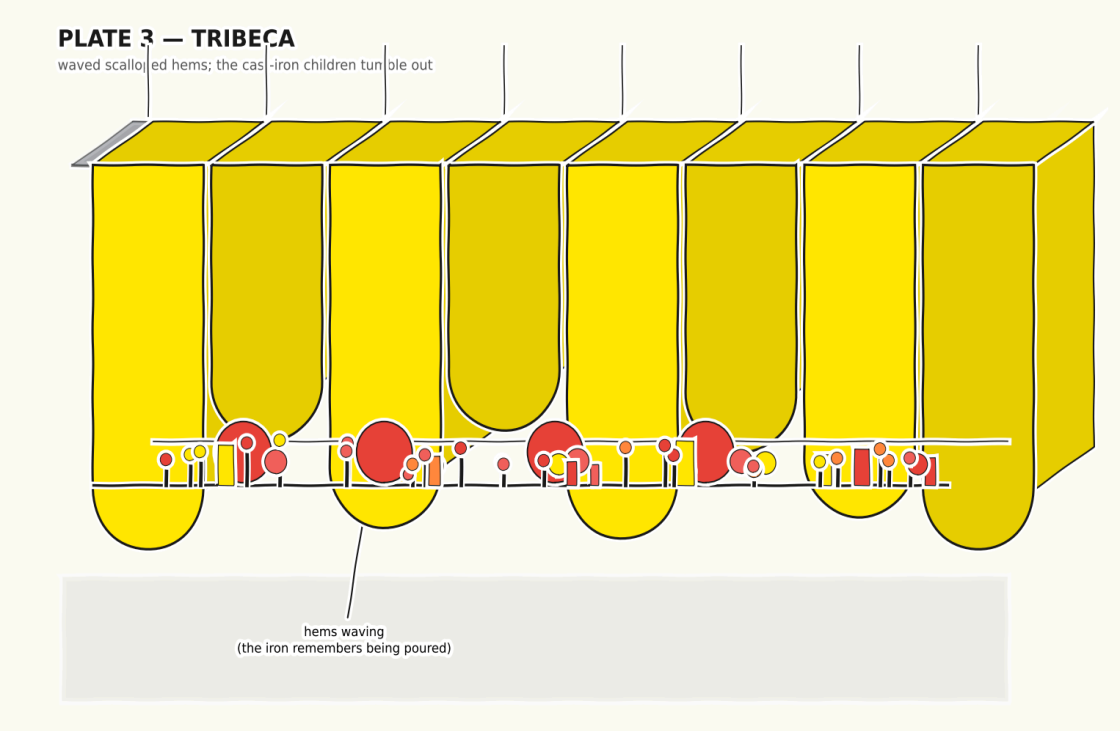
"Watch this, watch this," says a cherry-red building, and it does a thing with its cornice — a sort of flourish, a sort of tip, a sort of controlled topple — that is either showing off or falling over, and honestly even the building does not seem certain which, and that uncertainty is the joke, and the other buildings laugh, and the laugh of cast-iron buildings sounds like a hundred windows being thrown open at once on the first warm day of the year, that clatter and bang and rush of air.

"I saw," I tell it. "That was a good one. Do another."

And it does another, and the others do their own, a whole block of century-old cast-iron buildings showing off for a child with a broom, and I clap, and the cast claps, the little red letters and the pink one and the green one all clapping their small hands, and the buildings glow under the clapping the way only a show-off glows when the showing-off has actually landed. There is no shame here. That is the gift of this stop. The tall ones carried a hundred years of careful dignity; the cast-iron children carry nothing at all but the wish to be watched while they play, and the discovery — which they make fresh every single morning, having kept nothing overnight, like the pink one — that being watched while you play is the very best thing there is, better even than the playing, better than being praised for being good, because it asks nothing of you except that you keep being exactly as alive as you already are.

I have a soft spot for this stop. I will admit it. The tall ones move me and the lantern stop later will undo me entirely, but Tribeca is where I am happiest, because the cast-iron children are not trying to teach anyone anything. They are not bowing like the tall ones, learning a hard lesson about permission. They are not remembering hard things like the square will remember further up. They simply want to play, and to be seen playing, and they have arranged an entire neighborhood around that single uncomplicated want, and the arrangement works, and has worked for a hundred years, and will work for a hundred more.

There is a kind of wisdom that looks exactly like not needing any wisdom at all. The cast-iron children have it.



Elevation oblique — the curtain's configuration at Tribeca

A small one comes and stands beside me. It is no taller than a real child, no taller than me, and it is the deep wet red of the inside of a watermelon, and it does not roll or spin or show off. It just comes and stands close, the way children stand close to the one person in a loud bright room they have decided is safe — not touching, not talking, just near, just inside the warm radius of the safe person — and it watches the others play. And I let it. I do not tell it to go join in. I know that some of us, at recess, are players, and some of us are standers-near, and the standers-near are not broken players; they are having their own kind of recess, the kind that happens an arm's length from the noise, and it is just as good, and it must not be corrected.

"You do not have to play," I tell the small red one, quietly, just for the two of us. "You can just stand here. Standing here is also a way of being at the party. I do it all the time. Look — I am doing it right now, with you."

The small red one does not answer. But it leans, very slightly, the smallest possible lean, against my side, the way the tall one leaned forty floors up, the same gesture scaled all the way down to the size of a child made of watermelon-colored iron, and we stand together and watch the others play, and I understand that the lean is the answer, the lean is the whole answer, the lean is the most that some of us can say and it says everything.

The curtain, very kindly, does not move on. It feels the small red one leaning against me and it understands, the way it understands everything, and it holds the scene — the rolling reds, the spinning yellows, the show-off with its cornice, the clapping cast — and it does not move us along until the small red one is ready, which takes a while, because joy this size takes a while to be ready to leave, and the whole entire point of the curtain, the thing that makes it different from every other way of moving through a city, is that we have all day. We are not late for anything. There is nowhere we are supposed to be except exactly here, watching cast-iron children play, until the standers-near among us have had their fill of standing near.

I should say more about the rolling, because the rolling is the whole philosophy of Tribeca and I passed over it too quickly. A thing built to roll back upright — a weighted toy, a round-bottomed building, a cast-iron child — has made a particular peace with falling that the tall ones never could. The tall ones cannot afford to fall; a tall straight thing that falls is finished, broken on the ground, and so the tall ones spend everything they have on never falling, and that is why they are so lonely, because never-falling is a full-time job that leaves no time for anything else. But the cast-iron children fall constantly. They fall as a form of play. They tip themselves over on purpose to feel the good certain swing of coming back up, and falling holds no terror for them at all, because their whole design is the promise that down is only ever temporary. I think this is the deepest thing iron remembers from being poured: that it was liquid once, that it found a shape, and that finding a shape after being formless is proof, permanent proof, that you can always come back up from the floor.

The watermelon-red small one taught me something else, standing near, that I did not learn until later turning it over. There is a difference between a child who cannot play and a child who is choosing, for now, to watch. The world is forever trying to fix the watchers — to send them in, to make them join, to treat the standing-near as a problem to be solved with encouragement. But the watcher is not broken. The watcher is gathering. The watcher is doing the necessary private work of deciding, at their own pace, that the bright loud thing is safe to enter, and that work cannot be rushed and must not be shamed, and a keeper who tries to hurry a watcher into the game has understood nothing about how courage actually arrives. Courage does not arrive by being pushed. It arrives by being given time and a safe warm side to lean against while the watcher does the gathering. Then, when it is ready and not one moment before, it rolls itself in.

Eventually the small red one straightens. It has had enough; it is full; you can see the fullness in it the way you can see it in a child who has watched the recess and is, at last, content. It looks up at me. It still does not say anything. But it rolls — just once, just a little, an experimental quarter-turn on its rounded bottom — toward the others, and then looks back at me to see if that was all right, if standers-near are allowed to become players, and I nod, because of course they are, that is the other secret, the secret the standers-near most

need to know: that you can change your mind, that the arm's length from the noise is not a sentence, that whenever you are ready the playing will still be there and the players will make room. It rolls in. They make room. The curtain, satisfied, hums the track awake, and we go, and I am, as I am every time I leave Tribeca, the particular kind of happy that has a small ache in it, the ache of having watched something become brave at its own pace and on its own terms, which is the only pace and the only terms that bravery ever comes on.

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4. The Doodle That Got Loose

SOHO

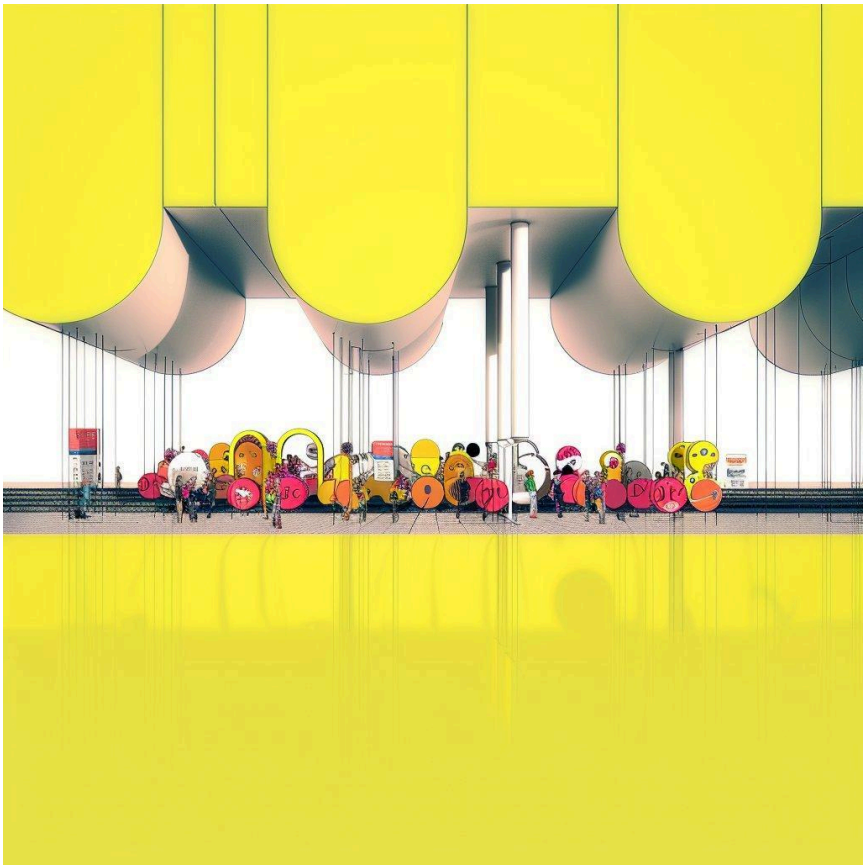


Plate 4

In SoHo the architecture has gone completely to drawing. I do not know how else to say it, and I have tried, on the walk between Tribeca and here, to find a better way to say it, and I cannot. When the hem lifts in SoHo the scene underneath is not made of buildings exactly, not even cast-iron ones, but of lines — looping, doubling, scribbling, backtracking lines in red and yellow and ink-black, as if someone with a very happy pen and absolutely no intention of staying inside any outline had been let loose on the entire block and had drawn until the block was more drawing than building, more gesture than thing.

And the cast here, the cast that travels with the curtain, is joined at this stop by a second cast, a native cast, the doodles that got loose. A whole crowd of them, packed wall to wall, every single one a different invented creature. This one is all loops, a thing made entirely of the cursive you do in the margin when you are on hold. This one is a face inside a circle, nothing more, two dots and a curve, and it is somehow one of the most expressive faces I have ever met. This one is purely a squiggle that has decided it is alive and is, I want to be clear, completely correct in that decision; it is as alive as I am; aliveness was never about

having the right parts. They are jammed together joyfully under the yellow, wall to wall, the densest crowd on the whole route, like the best party you were ever crammed into, the kind where you cannot move and do not want to and end up having the conversation of your life with whoever you happen to be pressed against.

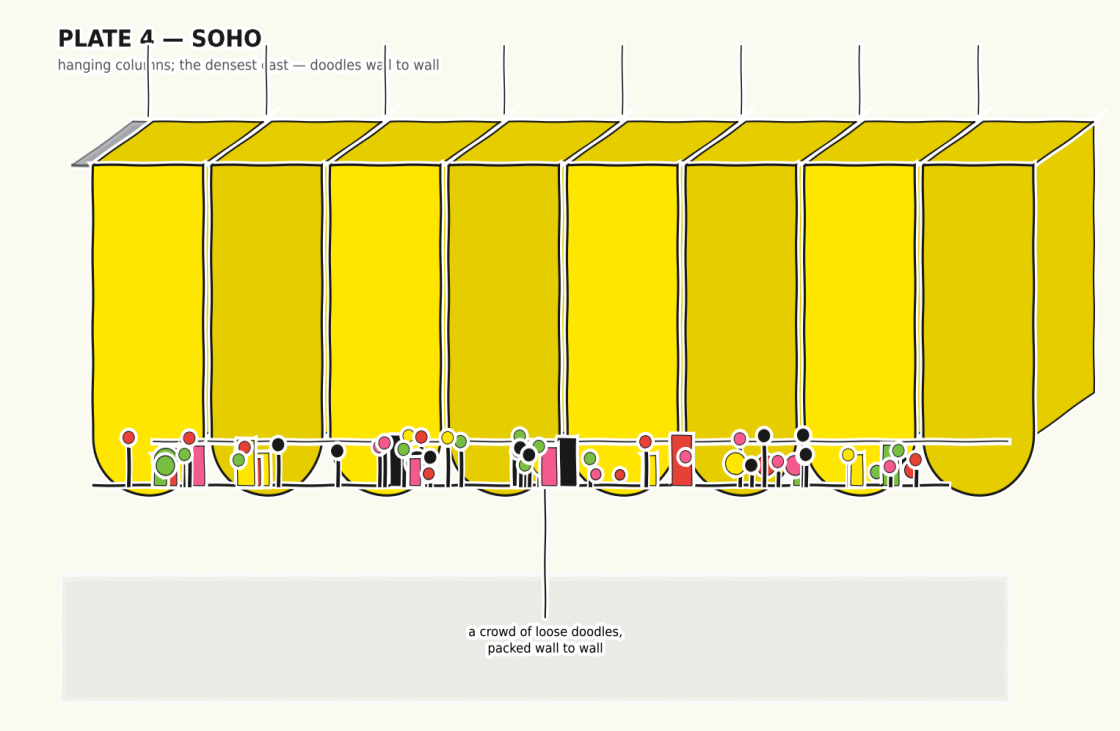
"Are we too much," asks a doodle, who is mostly elbows and enthusiasm and a single enormous eye. It asks it the way you ask a question you have been carrying a long time, lightly, as if it were not heavy, which is exactly how you can tell that it is. "We have always wondered. People used to look at us — back when we were just marks in the margins of their notebooks, just the things their pens did when their minds wandered somewhere better than the meeting — people used to look at us and say, that is too much, that is excessive, that is not how the thing is supposed to be drawn. And then they would turn the page. Are they right? Are we too much?"

"There is no such thing," I say, and I do not say it lightly back; I say it the way you answer a heavy question once you have felt its weight, slowly, so it lands. "Listen to me, because this is true and I need you to keep it. There is no such thing as too much of yourself. You cannot be too much of yourself. That is just called being finished. A thing that is fully itself looks like too much only to someone who wanted less of it, and wanting less of you is their condition, not yours. The pens that drew you in the margins — their minds wandered to you because you were the most alive thing on the page, more alive than the meeting, more alive than the notes. They did not draw you because they were bored. They drew you because some part of them was trying to escape toward exactly your kind of aliveness, and then the rest of them got scared of how much they wanted it, and called it too much, and turned the page. The turning of the page was fear. It was never a verdict on you. You were never too much. You were just more than they were ready to want."

The doodle considers this. You can see it considering, because the loops that make it up slow down, almost stop, hang there — and then speed back up, brighter, faster, the ink in them suddenly darker and more certain. And then it does something that undoes me a little. It adds a flourish to itself. A small extra curl, right at the top, that it did not have a moment ago — a new loop, a thought it has just decided to keep, a piece of more-of-itself that it is choosing, now, on purpose, in front of everyone, having just been told that more-of-itself is not a crime but a completion.

And the whole crowd of doodles sees it. And the whole crowd cheers — a sound like a thousand pens all scribbling at once, joyful and scratchy and fast — and then they all do it. Every doodle in the packed bright crowd adds a flourish, a curl, a loop, an extra eye, a longer tail, a second squiggle branching off the first. The block briefly becomes illegible with joy. You could not read it now if you tried; there is too much line, too much gesture, too much yes; an entire neighborhood writing itself larger and louder and more, in real time, because

one of them asked the heavy question lightly and got an answer that let it put the question down.



Elevation oblique — the curtain's configuration at SoHo

“Won't it get crowded,” the first doodle asks me, a little drunk on its own new curl, gesturing at the swelling illegible glory of the block. “If we all keep adding to ourselves. Won't we run out of room?”

“The room grows,” I tell it, and I believe this, I have watched it happen, it is one of the truest things the route has taught me. “That is the thing nobody believes until they see it. When one of you becomes more fully itself, it does not take up room the others needed. It makes room. It shows the others that the room was always bigger than they thought, that the edges they were cramming themselves inside of were drawn in pencil and can be erased. You are not competing for a fixed amount of space. You are teaching each other that the space was never fixed. Look — look how much more room there is now than when we arrived, and not one of you has left, and all of you are larger. That is not crowding. That is the opposite of crowding. That is what a place looks like when everyone in it has stopped apologizing for the size of their own aliveness.”

The curtain laughs its yellow laugh — I can feel it laughing, the whole great body of it shaking very gently, the way you shake when something is too delightful to hold still through — and the doodles laugh, and the traveling cast laughs, and the pink one's round face is so happy it has gone past surprised all the way to a kind of stunned, and the green

one starts a sentence about it and for once does not need to finish because the whole block is the finish of the sentence. We could stay here forever. I mean that more at this stop than at any other; SoHo is the stop I am most tempted to simply never leave, to set down my broom among the loose doodles and become a loose doodle myself, all loops and a single enormous eye, too much and finished and unafraid.

There is a thing about being called too much that I did not say to the doodle, because the doodle was not ready to hear it and you only give a creature the part of the truth it can carry. But I will say it to you, since you are reading and can put the book down if it is too much, which it is not. The people who call you too much are almost always telling you, without knowing it, the exact size of the room they have built inside themselves. Too much for what? Too much for the room they have. And the room they have is small not because rooms must be small but because they built it small, long ago, probably to keep something out, probably for reasons that were real at the time. Their small room is not your fault and not your responsibility and — this is the part that takes a lifetime — not your measure. You are not too big. Their room is small. Those are different sentences with different subjects, and almost everyone, told they are too much, hears the first sentence when the truth is always the second.

And here is what the doodles do that people could learn from, if people could learn from doodles, which they can, I have seen it. When one doodle added a flourish to itself and was cheered rather than shrunk, the others did not feel crowded by it. They felt permitted. That is the entire difference between a room that is small and a room that is growing: in the small room, someone else's flourish is a threat, a taking-up of space you needed; in the growing room, someone else's flourish is a permission slip, a demonstration that the adding-to-yourself is survivable and even celebrated. The doodles live in a growing room. They make the room grow by each refusing to be the one who shrinks. You could do this too, with the people you love. You could be the one who adds a flourish and survives it visibly, so the others learn that they can. Someone has to go first. In SoHo, that morning, it was a doodle made mostly of elbows. It is always someone made mostly of elbows who goes first. The elegant ones wait to see if it is safe.

But we have ten stops to go, and a keeper who stays is no longer a keeper, and the doodles do not need me to stay; that is the point; I have given them the thing and the thing is theirs now and will not unhappen when I leave. So I pick up my broom. The first doodle, the one with the new curl, loops itself once around me — not a hug exactly, doodles do not have arms, but a kind of encircling, a drawn line that goes all the way around the safe person and closes — and then lets go, and I step back onto the track, and the curtain lowers its hem over both casts, the traveling and the native, carrying the traveling one on and leaving the native one behind larger than we found it. The track hums. We go. Behind us SoHo is illegible with joy and will, I am fairly sure, stay that way, because you cannot un-know that

you were never too much, and a neighborhood that has learned it writes itself larger every single day after, forever, world without margins, amen.

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5. The Arches Learn to Sing

GREENWICH VILLAGE

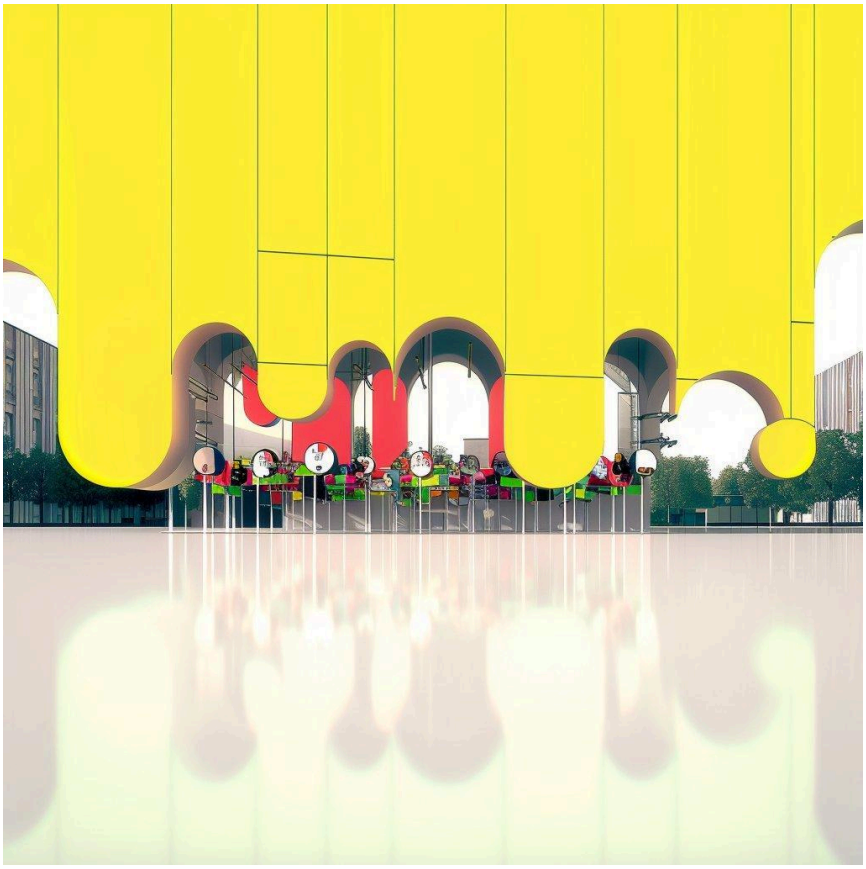


Plate 5

The Village is built low and crooked and kind, and its streets do not obey the grid — they wander, they cross themselves, they change their names halfway down and double back and end where you did not expect — and so the curtain does not hang straight here either. It cannot. The Village would not stand for a straight curtain. Instead the hem sags and loops between the low buildings in soft yellow scallops, dipping down to nearly touch a rooftop and then rising again, dipping and rising, so that the hem itself becomes a row of arches, and under each separate arch a separate small scene is framed, like the windows in a calendar of good days, like a row of little stages each set for a different play.

Under the arches the cast — ours, and the Village's own — has set up something between a market and a band and a conversation that has been going on so long nobody remembers starting it. There is green everywhere, the green of new things, of pea shoots and lime peel and the first leaves, and red among the green, and the little figures are arranged in clusters under the separate arches, and here is the miracle of this stop, the thing I bring people to

the Village specifically to understand: each cluster is making a different sound, and the sounds do not clash.

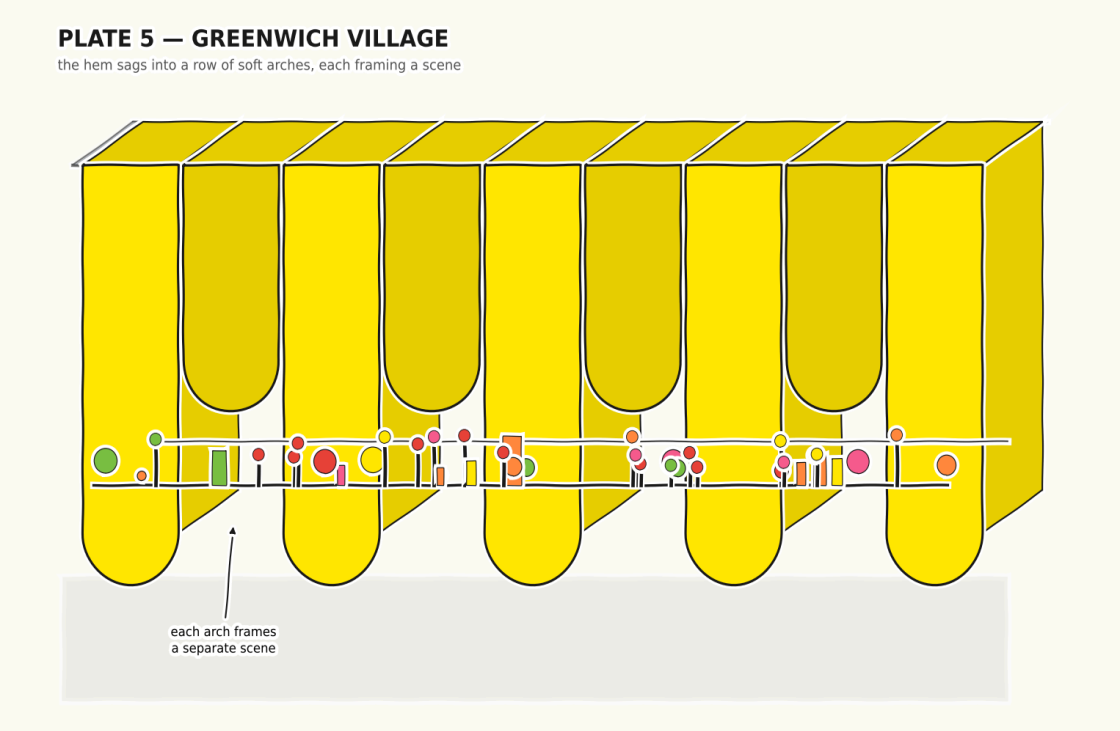
In most of the city the sounds clash. You know this. You live in it, or somewhere like it. The fruit-seller's call cuts across the busker's chord which is drowned by the bus which is arguing with the car which is interrupted by the jackhammer, and it is all just noise, a grey wall of noise, and you put in your headphones to build a smaller kinder wall against the big unkind one. But here, under the looping yellow, under the row of arches — the fruit-seller's call and the busker's chord and the argument about nothing in particular and the baby's first experiments with the surprising fact of its own voice all arrive at the ear already arranged. Already sorted. Already a song. As if the arches themselves were tuning the neighborhood as its noise passed up through them, catching each sound and setting it gently in its place, so that what reaches you is not the wall but the music the wall was always secretly made of.

"We were always making this song," says the largest arch, in a voice that is itself a little musical, surprised at itself, the way you are surprised the first time you hear a recording of yourself singing and it is better than you feared. "All this time. The whole Village, every day, all the calling and chording and arguing and the babies finding their voices — we were always making this exact song. We just could not hear it. It was too close. We were inside it. You cannot hear the song you are inside of until something frames an edge around it and hands it back to you from a half-step away."

And that, I think, sitting down under the middle arch to listen, is what the curtain does. More than the bowing it teaches the tall ones, more than the permission it gives the doodles — underneath all of it, this is the curtain's one true trick, and it is not really a trick at all. The curtain does not add the joy. I want to be careful to say this exactly right, because it is the center of everything. The joy was already there. It was always already there, in the tall ones and the cast-iron children and the loose doodles and the calling Village, scattered and clashing and going to waste for lack of a frame. The curtain only frames it. It holds a yellow edge around what is already happening and says: here. This. Look at this. And the instant a thing is framed it becomes unmistakable, and a moment after that it becomes unforgettable, and a moment after that it becomes yours, to keep, to carry, to take home into the grey and hold up against the window on a hard morning.

I sit under the middle arch a long while and let the framed song wash through me. It is in no hurry; neither am I; the curtain, as ever, has given us all day. The song is made of: a bell on a shop door. A skateboard's rumble and the particular silence after it stops. Someone practicing scales through an open third-floor window, missing the same note each time, missing it more tenderly each time. Two old friends disagreeing about a film with the deep contentment of people who have disagreed about everything for fifty years and consider it the foundation of the friendship. A dog with opinions. The baby, again, delighted again, as if

its voice were a toy it keeps rediscovering in the bottom of the box. None of it was composed. All of it is a composition. That is the Village, framed.



Elevation oblique — the curtain's configuration at Greenwich Village

A figure the green of a new pea pod comes and sits beside me under the middle arch and, without being asked, without a word, breaks its sandwich in half and gives me the larger half. This too is the Village; this is the Village's own native verse in the larger song; the unasked half-sandwich, the kindness that does not announce itself or wait to be deserved. I take it. You always take it; refusing it would be refusing the song. We eat under the arch and listen to the neighborhood be unknowingly beautiful, and the green figure hums along to a tune that has no fixed melody and somehow hums it correctly anyway, because in the Village there is no wrong way to hum the song; the song is large enough to be right however you come at it.

“Will it last,” the green figure asks me, around a mouthful of sandwich, gesturing with its chin at the whole framed singing scene. “After you go. After the curtain takes the frame away to the next stop. Does the Village go back to being just noise?”

“Here is the strange part,” I say. “It does and it doesn't. The frame leaves, yes. The yellow edge moves up the island with me. And tomorrow the calling and chording and arguing will sound, to most ears, like noise again, the way it did before we came. But not to every ear. Because someone — maybe the busker, maybe the baby's tired parent, maybe one of the two old friends — someone heard the song just now, while the frame was up, and you cannot

un-hear the song you are inside of once you have heard it from a half-step away. They will carry the half-step with them now. They will hear the song in the noise from the inside, which is harder, which is rarer, which is the whole of what it means to love a place. The frame teaches a few ears in each neighborhood to hear from the inside. And a few ears is enough. A few ears, in each place, keep the song going long after the yellow has moved on."

There is a craft to the framing that the arches do, and I have tried to learn it, standing under the middle arch all those mornings, because if the curtain is teaching the island to frame its own joy then the keeper had better understand the framing well enough to teach it after the yellow is gone. And here is what I have worked out about how the arches turn noise into song. They do not silence anything. That is the first thing, and the thing everyone gets wrong, reaching for headphones, building the smaller kinder wall against the bigger one. The arches do not subtract a single sound. The fruit-seller still calls; the bus still groans; the argument about nothing still rises and falls. Nothing is removed. The framing is entirely additive: the arches add an edge of attention, a held boundary of listening, and inside that boundary the very same sounds that were noise become, without changing at all, music. The transformation is not in the sounds. It is in the listening. And listening, unlike the sounds, is a thing you control.

Which means — and this is the part that kept me under the arch long after the green figure had finished its half of the sandwich — which means that anyone can do it, anywhere, without a single arch, because the arch was never really the thing. The arch was a teacher of the listening. The real instrument is the attention, and everyone is already carrying one of those, has been carrying it the whole time, usually switched off, usually aimed at the wall and told to hear noise. You can switch it on. You can aim it at the same unchanged street and decide to hear the song the street is always secretly making. It is hard, much harder than putting in headphones, because the headphones do the work for you and the attention you must do yourself. But it is the difference between defending yourself against a place and loving it, and the Village, of all the neighborhoods, is the one that most rewards being loved that way, being heard from the inside, framed by your own switched-on attention into the long unhurried song it has been singing under its crooked kind low roofs the entire time.

The green figure thinks about this, finishes its half, and nods, satisfied, the way the cast-iron child nodded, the way the doodle's loops sped up. And then it does the Village thing once more, the closing thing: it pats the stone of the arch beside it, fondly, the way you pat the flank of an animal you are grateful to, and the arch — I swear this — the arch leans very slightly into the pat, the same lean, the tall one's lean, the small red child's lean, the universal lean of a thing that has been touched kindly and wants to say so without words. Everything on this island leans, once you have framed it long enough to see. We get up. I am humming. I cannot get the framed song out of my head and I am not trying to, and that, I have decided, is the entire difference between a song that is stuck and a song that is kept — a

stuck song you are trying to be rid of, and a kept song you are carrying on purpose, and they can be the very same notes, and the only thing that differs is whether you have decided to be glad of them. I have decided. We climb back onto the track. Nine stops to go, and the whole Village singing behind us, and a few new ears in it now that will keep the song.

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6. The Square That Remembered

UNION SQUARE

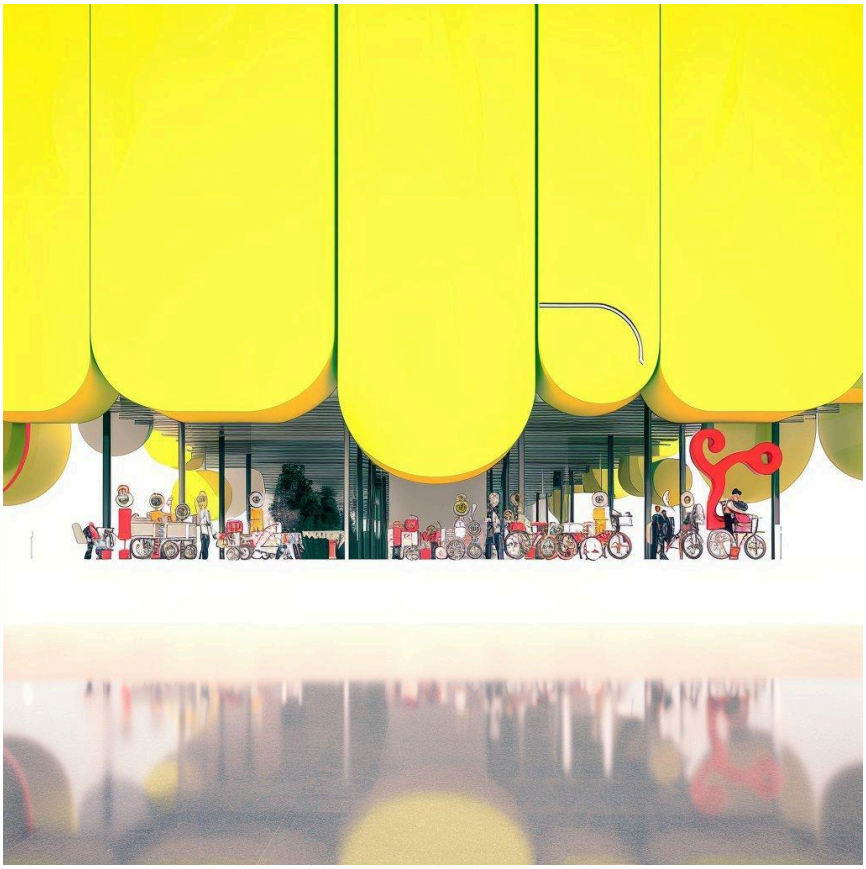


Plate 6

Union Square has always been the island's gathering place. For two centuries it has been the spot where people came to stand together when standing together was the only thing left to do — when there were no words good enough and no actions large enough and the only available comfort was the warm fact of other bodies, also frightened, also hopeful, also unwilling to be alone with it. Every march began or ended here. Every vigil found its way here, candles cupped against the wind. Every farmers' market, every first kiss on the south steps, every protest and every reunion and every ordinary lunch eaten on a bench in the sun. The square remembers all of it. It is a building made mostly of memory, and I have learned, on this route, that memory can be very heavy, heavier than stone, heavier than a hundred years of standing straight.

So when the curtain lifts its hem here — tall flat panels at this stop, dignified, the curtain seems to stand at a kind of attention for Union Square the way you stand differently in a place where important things have happened — when the hem lifts, I brace for the heaviness. I expect the square to show me its sorrows. They are right there; I can feel them;

two hundred years of candle-wax and chanting and grief pressed into the paving. I expect a sad stop. I have, some mornings, gotten one. The square is allowed its sad mornings; we all are; a keeper does not insist on joy from a place not ready to give it.

But this morning the square does something I am never quite ready for, however many times I see it. It brings out the bicycles.

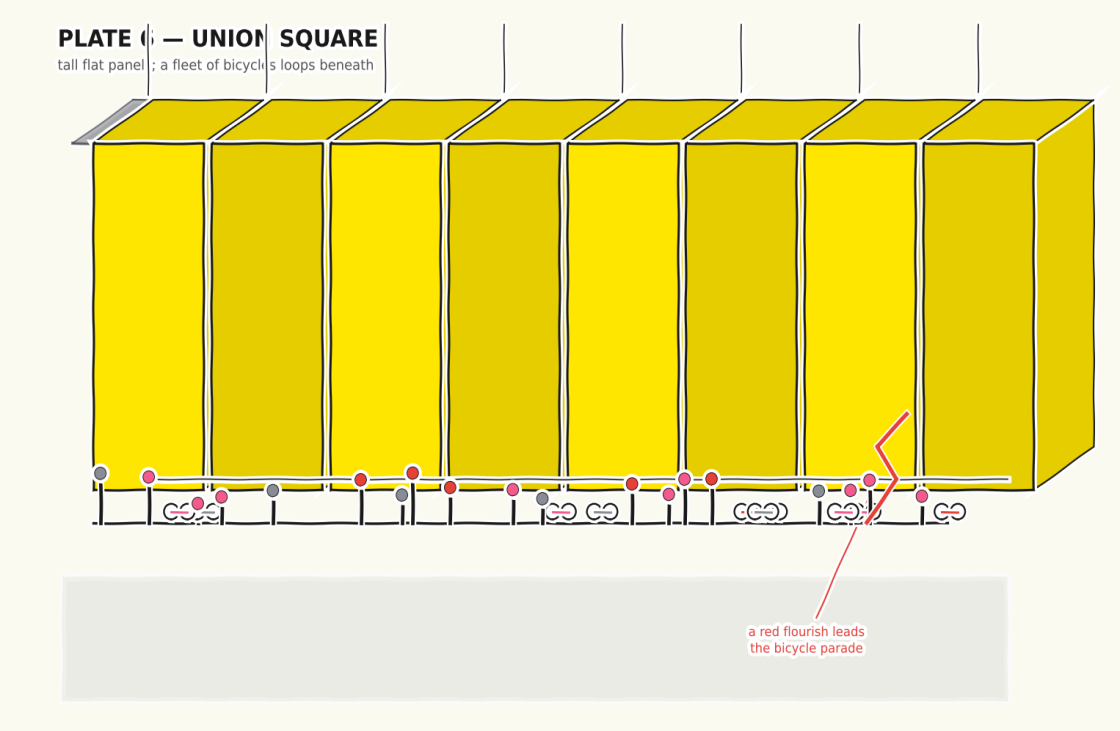
A whole bright fleet of them. Red-framed, silver-wheeled, ridden and pushed and walked and ringing their small bells — the cast wheeling them in great looping circles under the yellow, weaving, calling to one another, and leading the whole glorious procession a single curling red flourish of a thing, a shape like a question mark that has thought better of the question and decided to be a parade instead. They loop the square. They ring. And I understand, watching, what the square is telling me, and it is not what I braced for.

The square is not showing me its sorrows. It is showing me what the sorrows were for. All that gathering — all that standing together in the cold with candles, all those marches that began and ended here, all that grief held in common because it could not be held alone — it was practice. It was the square learning, slowly, over two centuries, the hardest and most important civic skill there is: how to be a place where people come together. And the square is showing me that the final exam of that long practice, the thing all the gathering was secretly for, is not more grief. It is this. The bicycles. The looping and the ringing and the going-somewhere-good together. The best use of a shared place, the square has decided, is not to stand still in it mourning, however necessary the mourning was. The best use is to move through it together, freely, bells ringing, on the way to a good thing, in company.

“I thought the heavy times were the important ones,” the square says, and its voice is the murmur of a thousand thousand footsteps gone gentle, the sound a place makes when it has been walked across by everyone for two hundred years and has loved every footstep. “I kept them so carefully. The marches. The vigils. The nights people came here because they had nowhere else to put what they were feeling. I thought those were the times that mattered, and the lunches and the kisses and the ordinary afternoons were just the spaces in between. I built my whole self around the heavy times. I am not sure I knew I was allowed to think the bicycles mattered too.”

“Keep the heavy times,” I tell it, because this is not a square you tell to let go; you do not tell a place that held a city's grief to simply set it down; that would be a cruelty dressed as comfort. “Keep every one of them. They did matter; they matter still; you were right to keep them and you must not throw them away. But look — look what they were practice for. You learned, in the heavy times, how to gather people. That skill does not only work for grief. It is the same skill, exactly the same, that lets you gather people for joy. The marches taught you the muscle. The bicycles are the muscle used for delight. You did not waste two hundred years on sorrow. You spent two hundred years learning to hold a crowd, and now you know

how, and a crowd can be held for anything, and you get to choose, from now on, what you hold them for.”



Elevation oblique — the curtain's configuration at Union Square

The bicycles loop and ring. A figure on the very smallest bike, a figure no bigger than a passing thought, rings its bell in a deliberate little rhythm — three short, one long — and the other bells hear it and answer, picking up the rhythm, passing it around the looping circle, and within a minute the whole square is chiming, all the small bells ringing the little figure's rhythm, the entire gathering place sounding suddenly like the inside of a clock that has decided to tell only good hours, that has fired the hands that pointed at the bad ones and kept only the chimes. The heaviness does not vanish. I want to be honest about that, because a book that promised you the heaviness would vanish would be lying to you, and this book does not lie to you. The grief is still there in the paving. But it has changed its job. It has become ballast. It has become the weight low in the hull that keeps all this brightness from simply floating up off the island and away, the way a thing with no history floats away, weightless and therefore unmoored. The square's two centuries of grief are exactly what let it hold this much joy without losing it to the wind. The heavy times are the keel.

“Oh,” says the square, and it is the same “oh” the tall tower said, the “oh” of a thing rearranging its whole understanding of itself in a single breath. “Oh. The heaviness is not the opposite of this. The heaviness is what holds this down.”

“That is the truest thing a gathering place can learn,” I tell it. “And you are the oldest gathering place on the island, so it is fitting that you are the one to learn it. The places that have never grieved cannot hold much joy; it floats right off them; you have seen it, the bright empty plazas where nothing has ever happened, where the joy never sticks. You are not one of those. You are heavy, and being heavy, you can carry an extraordinary amount of light.”

I have been to Union Square on its sad mornings too, and I owe you those, because a book that showed you only the bicycle mornings would be selling you a square that does not exist. On the sad mornings the curtain lifts its hem and the square simply cannot. The grief is too near the surface; some anniversary, some fresh wound in the city, some weight the paving cannot lighten that day; and the cast comes out subdued, and the bicycles stay wherever bicycles go when they are not wanted, and the square shows me, instead of looping joy, the candles. And I do not force it. That is the keeping. On the sad mornings I sweep the mirror-pool very quietly and I let the square grieve and I do not say a single word about bicycles, because the worst thing you can do to a place in grief is to insist on its joy before it is ready, to arrive with your bright frame and demand a performance of recovery. The square will come back to the bicycles. It always does. But it comes back in its own time, and the keeper's whole skill on the sad mornings is the skill of being present without insisting, of holding the frame loosely enough that grief can fill it instead of joy, because grief framed and witnessed is also a kind of music, lower and slower, and it too deserves to be heard rather than hurried.

The bicycles, when they do come, are not a denial of the candles. That is the thing I most want you to understand about Union Square, the thing that took me the longest to learn. The bright looping bicycle mornings are not the square pretending the grief never happened. They are the square having metabolized the grief so thoroughly that it can now power joy. The candles and the bicycles are the same energy in two different seasons. A square that had refused its grief, that had paved over the candles and insisted on bicycles from the start, would have hollow bicycles, joyless loops, the manic brightness of a place running from itself. Union Square's bicycles are not running from anything. They loop in full view of the remembered candles, and ring their bells in a place that knows exactly what it is to fall silent, and that is why the chiming goes all the way through you: it is joy that has been all the way down and chosen, knowingly, to come back up ringing.

We stay a long while. The bicycles loop. The bells chime the small figure's rhythm. The cast wheels and calls. And when at last the curtain hums the track awake and we begin to move, I look back — of course I look back — and the square is still chiming, lighter than it has been in two hundred years and not one single ounce less full, the grief and the bicycles riding together now, the keel and the sail, the heavy times holding down the bright ones, the whole square at last understanding that it was never choosing between remembering and rejoicing, that it could do both, that it had in fact been built, over two long centuries,

precisely so that it could do both at once. That is what the oldest places are for. Not to choose. To carry everything, all of it, the candle-wax and the bicycle bells, and to call the carrying joy.

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7. The Iron at the Crossroads

FLATIRON

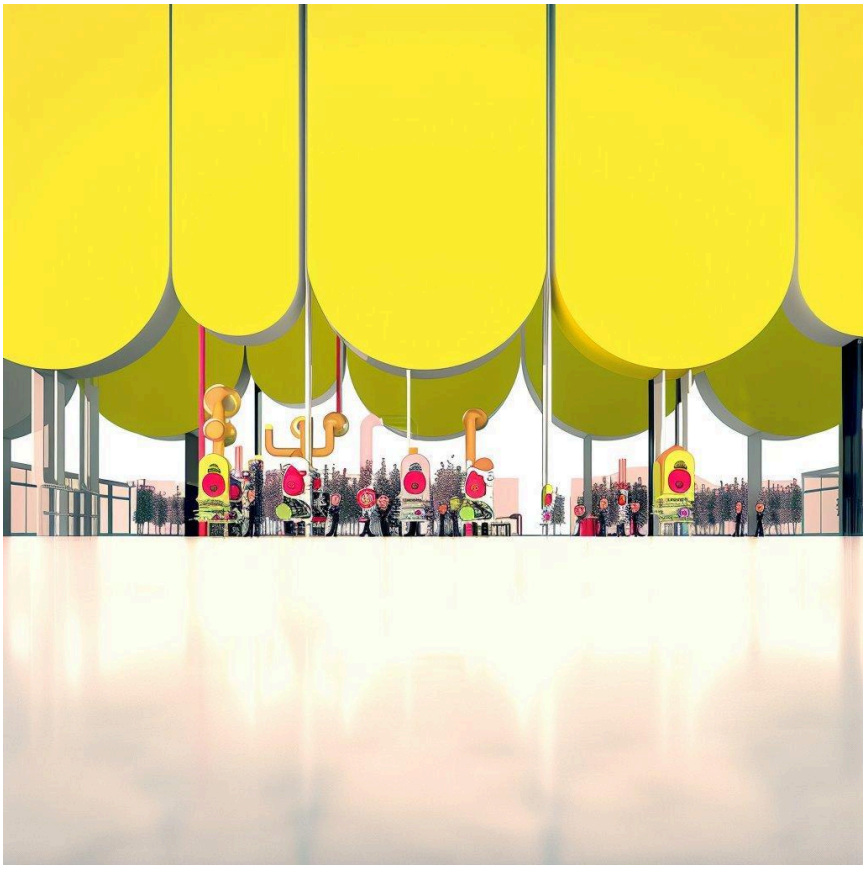


Plate 7

At the crossroads where Broadway breaks the rules and cuts diagonally across the obedient grid stands the building shaped like the prow of a ship — the thin one, the famous wedge, narrow as a wish at its leading edge, sailing north into an uptown it has never once reached and never will. It has spent its entire life sailing toward a destination it cannot arrive at, splitting the two avenues like water before a bow, and it is, I think, the most photographed lonely thing in the whole city. Everyone aims a camera at it. Everyone has a picture of it. And not one of them, in all the millions of pictures, ever thought to ask the obvious question, the question I asked the first time the route brought me here and have asked every time since: where is it trying to go?

The curtain stops at the crossroads, and here the panels converge — they angle in toward a point, echoing the prow, so that the whole curtain seems to become a ship too, a great soft yellow ship moored for a moment beside the thin stone one — and the hem lifts, and the cast pours into the triangular plaza around the prow. Figures with round cheerful instruments, the brass kind, the kind that go oom and pah. Machines like polished brass curls, like the

treble clefs of some enormous sheet of music. A crowd so dense and so small and so happy that it looks, at last, like the company the wedge has been sailing toward for a hundred and twenty years has finally, all at once, come aboard.

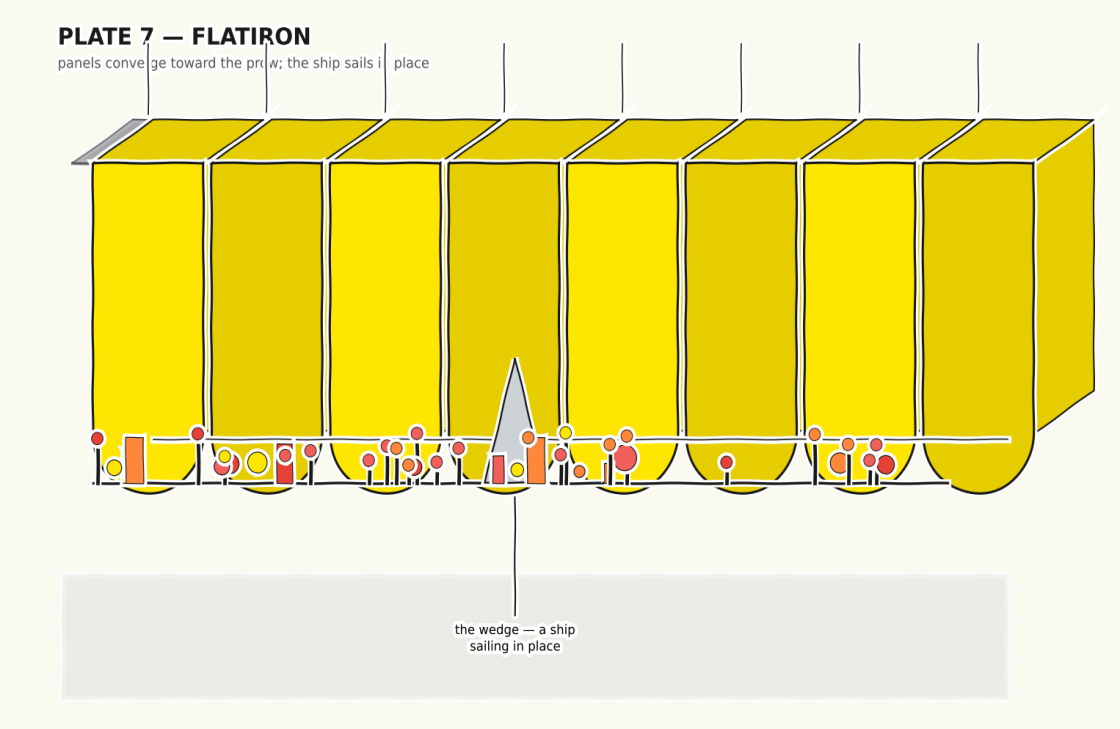
"I was beginning to think the destination was the point," the wedge says, and its voice is like a bow cutting calm water, a long clean sound with a hush inside it. "I was beginning to think — I have had a long time to think, sailing and never arriving — I was beginning to think I had failed. That a ship that never reaches port is a broken ship. That all this sailing, all these years, pointing north, splitting the avenues, and never once arriving anywhere — that it meant I had been built wrong, aimed at a harbor I would never make. I have been ashamed of it. Can you understand that? I have been ashamed, all this time, underneath the photographs, of never arriving."

And this, of all the things the buildings have confessed to me on this route, is the one that catches in my throat, because it is the most human of them, the most like the thing I hear in people, the exact shape of the shame I have felt myself and watched nearly everyone I love feel: the conviction that because you have not arrived, you have failed; that the not-yet is a verdict; that a life in motion toward something it has not reached is a life that has gone wrong rather than a life that is simply, gloriously, still going.

"You are a ship," I tell the wedge, and I put my hand on its cold thin stone prow as I say it, because some things should be said with a hand on the listener. "Listen. Ships are not for arriving. That is the whole thing you have had backwards, all these lonely years, and it is not your fault, because everyone has it backwards, the whole city has it backwards, the millions with their cameras have it backwards. A ship is not a failed harbor. A ship is the place the good part happens. The harbor is just where the good part stops. Everything that matters on a voyage happens on the deck, in motion, between the ports — the company, the weather, the songs, the long talks at the rail, the whole life of the crossing. The arriving is just the end of all that. You have not failed to arrive. You have succeeded, for a hundred and twenty years, at the actual point of being a ship, which is to carry everyone through the good part for as long as the good part can be made to last. You have been doing the thing the whole time. You only thought it was the waiting room for the thing."

The wedge is silent. The brass curls play — oom, pah, a fat happy marching tune — and the round-faced figures dance in the narrow triangle, packed prow to stern, and the dense small crowd sways, and for a long moment the wedge says nothing at all, and I wonder if I have said the wrong thing, pressed too hard, and then I feel it, under my hand on the stone prow: the wedge stops straining. For the first time in a hundred and twenty years, the great thin ship stops trying to get uptown. It stops leaning north. It stops sailing toward and simply sails — in place, gloriously, going absolutely nowhere, carrying absolutely everyone, the brass playing on its deck, the dancers swaying in its triangle, the whole good part

happening all over it at once now that it has finally stopped rushing toward the place where the good part would have to end.



Elevation oblique — the curtain's configuration at Flatiron

"Oh," says the wedge — there it is, the third "oh," the island's one great syllable of understanding — "oh, I do not have to get there. I never had to get there. The not-getting-there was never the failure. The not-getting-there was the voyage. I have been on the best part the entire time and spent it ashamed of not reaching the worst part, which is the end."

"The end is not the worst part," I say, because I do not want to leave it with that. "Arriving is sweet too, in its time. But you are not near your time, you are a building, you will sail for centuries yet, and the centuries are not a punishment to be endured until the harbor. They are the voyage. They are the gift. Sail them. Stop counting them as failures to arrive and start spending them as the crossing they are."

I keep coming back, in my mind, to the moment the wedge stopped straining. I have felt a great many buildings change under my hand on this route, but the wedge's change was the quietest and I think the largest. There was no dramatic motion. It did not suddenly turn or visibly relax or do anything a camera could have caught. It simply stopped doing one thing it had done every second for a hundred and twenty years: it stopped leaning north. It stopped aiming. The whole enormous effort of straining toward an unreachable harbor, an effort so constant the wedge had forgotten it was even making it, the way you forget the weight of

your own held breath until you let it out — it let it out. And the letting-out was the entire transformation, invisible and total, the building exactly where it had always been and entirely different, because it had put down a striving it had been carrying so long it had mistaken the striving for itself.

That is the thing about the strivings we carry longest: we stop being able to tell them apart from who we are. The wedge thought it was a thing that strained toward harbor. It was not. It was a ship, and the straining was something it was doing, not something it was, and the proof is that when it stopped straining it did not stop being a ship — it became more fully a ship, a ship at last doing the actual work of ships, which is carrying the good part. I think everyone has at least one striving they have carried so long they have confused it for their nature, one northward lean so constant they no longer feel themselves making it. And I think the kindest and most frightening question you can be asked is the one I asked the wedge with my hand on its prow: what are you straining toward, and what would you be if you simply stopped, and is the straining actually you, or is it only a thing you have been doing for so long that you forgot you were the one doing it and could, at any moment, by simply letting out the held breath, stop?

The brass curls play and the dancers dance and the cameras that have always, always aimed at the wedge's loneliness catch, this morning, the exact opposite of loneliness — a ship full of company, sailing in joyful place — and do not understand what they have caught, and keep it forever anyway, the way cameras keep things they do not understand, which is how most of the truest pictures get taken. The curtain dips its converging hem to the wedge, the way you tip your hat to a captain you respect, and we sail on without it, which is exactly right, which is the only right thing, because a ship should never leave its own deck, and the wedge's deck is where the wedge belongs, sailing in place at the crossroads, carrying everyone through the good part, for as many centuries as it is given, ashamed no longer.

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8. The Red Beneath the Yellow

HERALD SQUARE

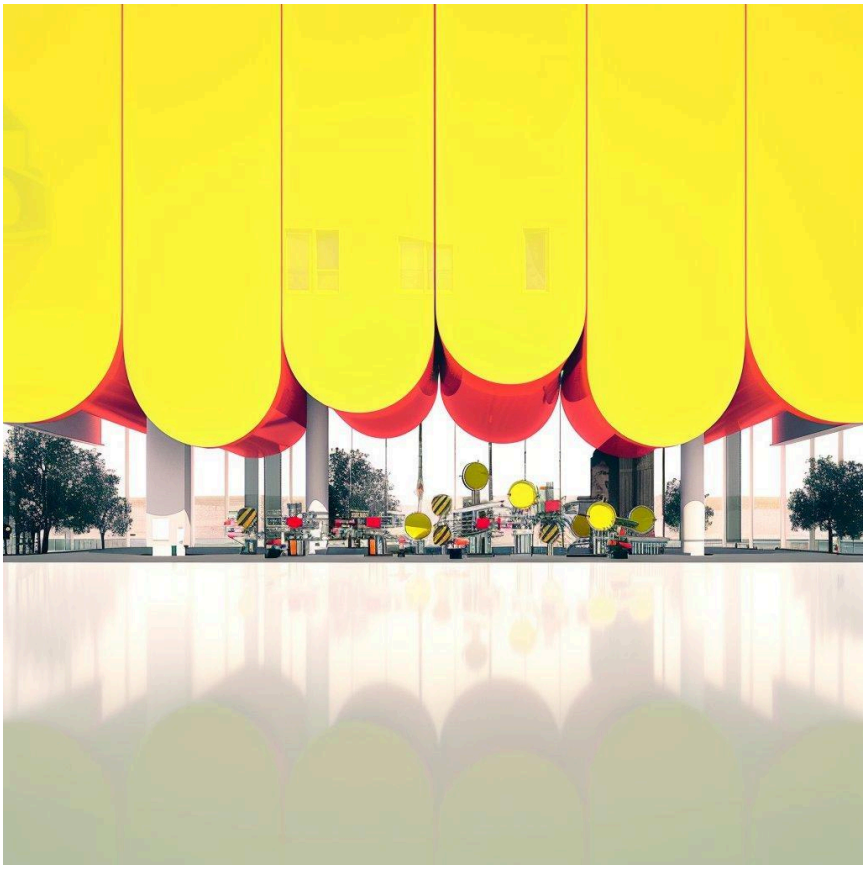

Plate 8

Something different happens at Herald Square, and I have thought about it more than any other stop on the route, turned it over more nights, and I am still not certain I understand it, and I have decided that not understanding it is correct, that some things you are meant to witness rather than explain. Here, when the curtain lifts its hem — and it lifts it high, higher than anywhere but the finale — you can see, for the first time on the whole journey, that the underside of the yellow is red. A deep, warm, coral red. The red of the inside of a thing. The color you only ever see when something opens to you completely, when it shows you not the face it shows the world but the warm secret lining it shows only to the few who have come close enough and stayed long enough to be shown.

All the way up the island the curtain has been yellow. Yellow to the harbor, yellow to the tall ones, yellow to the doodles and the arches and the bicycles — the public, glad, bright yellow that turns grey mornings warm, the yellow that is the whole reason the city looks up. That is the side that faces out. But the underside, the side that only the cast and I and the wakened buildings ever see when the hem lifts — the underside is this private coral red, and

at Herald Square, for reasons the curtain has never once explained to me in all my mornings, it lifts its hem so high that the whole neighborhood, all at once, every commuter and pigeon and patient awning, sees the red.

The cast below has arranged itself around discs striped yellow and black — caution-colored, the colors of edges and warnings, of mind-the-gap and wet-floor and do-not-cross — and small red signs, and for a moment, the first moment, I brace the way I braced at Union Square, because those are the colors of being careful, of being told no, of the world's ten thousand small refusals. Herald Square is a crossing place, a place of department stores and transit and hurry, a place that has spent its life telling people to watch their step, and the caution-stripes are its native tongue.

But the buildings have flipped the meaning. This is the thing the whole city learns once the curtain has passed through it; I have watched it happen at stop after stop; the meanings flip; the thing you were braced against turns out to be, all along, a thing you could have been delighted by, if only someone had framed it for you from a half-step away. “The edges are where the good stuff is,” says a building hung all over with the yellow-and-black striped discs, and it says it with the cheerful certainty of a thing that has just figured itself out. “We always thought the warning colors meant danger, meant stop, meant no. But that was never what they meant. Look at where you put a caution stripe — you put it exactly where something is about to happen. The edge of the platform. The lip of the stair. The threshold. The warning colors do not mean nothing-here. They mean everything-here. They mean: pay attention, pay attention, this is the spot where the world is most awake. The caution stripe is not a refusal. It is the city pointing at its own most alive places and saying look, look, here.”

And once it has said that, I cannot unsee it, and neither can you now, and neither could anyone at Herald Square that morning. There is so much, once you pay attention. So much, under the high-lifted hem, in the caution-colored light, in the warm red glow of the curtain's revealed underside. The square becomes more itself than any careful place has ever been allowed to be, every edge and threshold and lip of stair suddenly readable not as danger but as the city's own map of where its life is densest.

I think the red is the curtain's heart. I have come to think this slowly, over many mornings, and I think it is true. I think the yellow is what the curtain shows the world — the brave bright public gladness, the turning of grey mornings warm — and the red is what the curtain is actually made of, underneath, the warm secret thing it carries up the island and shows only when it lifts its hem high enough, only to those who are close enough, only for as long as it dares. The same way a person can be bright all day in public, can do the gladness and mean it, and still have, underneath, a private warmth, a coral lining, a heart-red they show only to the ones who have walked the whole length of the island beside them and earned, by the walking, the lifting of the hem. The yellow is real. I want to be clear: the

yellow is not a mask over the red, not a lie hiding a truth. The yellow is as true as the red. But the red is what the yellow is for. The brightness is in service of the warmth. The public gladness exists to carry the private heart safely up the island and show it, here, at the one stop where the hem lifts high enough, to everyone at once, before lowering again.

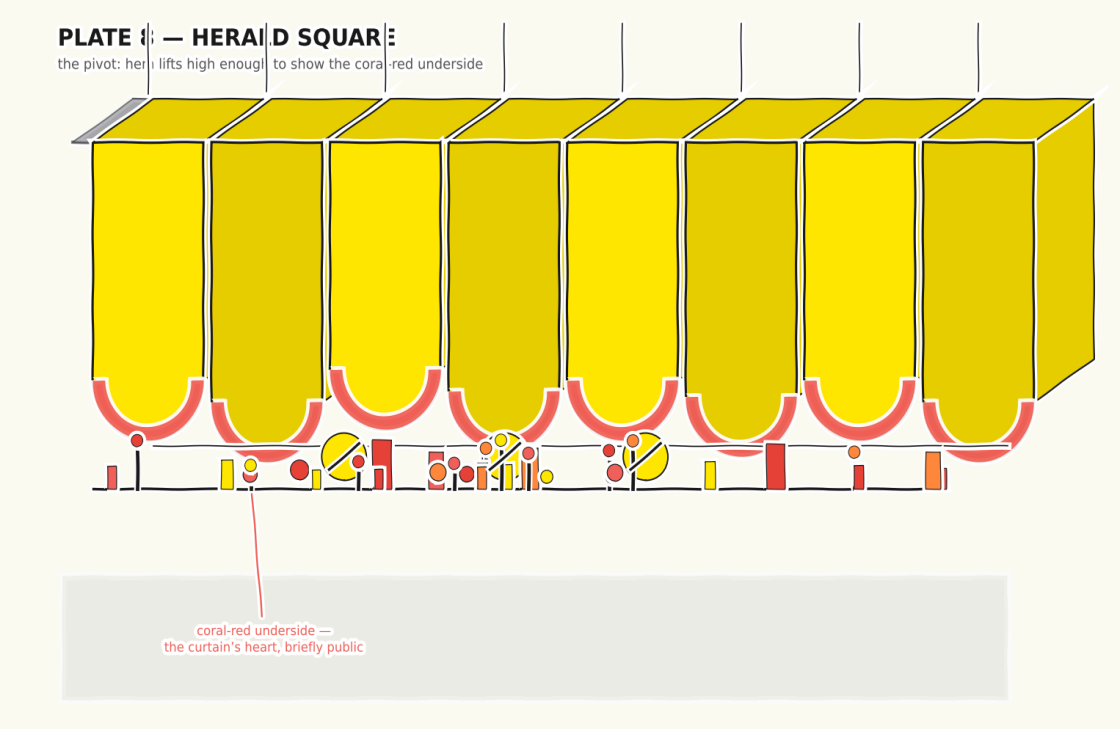
PLATE 8 — HERALD SQUARE
the pivot: hem lifts high enough to show the coral-red underside
coral-red underside —
the curtain's heart, briefly public

Elevation oblique — the curtain's configuration at Herald Square

"Why here," I ask the curtain, which does not usually answer me, which speaks even less than the mirror-pool, but which I ask anyway, every time, at this stop. "Why do you show the red here, at Herald Square, of all the stops? Why not at the Battery where we are alone, or at the finale where everyone is gathered? Why here, in the middle, in the hurry, in the place of crossings and cautions?"

And the curtain does not answer in words — it never answers in words — but it holds the high hem a moment longer, the red glowing warm over the caution-colored square, and I think I understand, or I witness without understanding, which is the same thing here. It shows the red in the middle, in the hurry, at the crossing, because the middle of the hurry is exactly where people most need to be shown a heart. Not at the peaceful start. Not at the triumphant end. In the grinding middle, in the place built for watching your step and minding the gap and being told no — that is where a glimpse of the warm red lining underneath the bright brave yellow does the most good, lands on the most tired and most careful and most hurried people, and tells them: the edges are where the good stuff is, the cautions are the city pointing at its own aliveness, and underneath all the brightness you are

asked to perform there is a real warm heart, and it is the same in you as it is in the curtain, and it is allowed, here, in the middle of the hurry, to be briefly and completely seen.

I have wondered, on the quiet walks after Herald Square, whether everyone has a coral-red underside, or only some of us, and I have decided that everyone does, and that the only variable is how high they are willing to lift the hem and who they will lift it for. The yellow side is real — I keep insisting on this because it matters — the bright public glad side is not a costume over the true self; it is also the true self; a person can be genuinely, all-the-way bright in the daylight and still have the warm red lining underneath, and the lining does not make the brightness a lie. But the lining is what the brightness is in service of. We are bright in public partly to protect the red, to carry it safely through the day, to keep it from being grabbed at by everyone who passes. And then, with the few — the ones who have walked the length of the island beside us, the ones who have earned it by staying — we lift the hem, and show the red, and it is the most frightening and the most necessary thing a person ever does.

What Herald Square taught me, specifically, is that the showing of the red is best done not in the safe places but in the hard ones. I would have guessed the opposite. I would have guessed you show your warm secret heart in the quiet protected moments, at the peaceful start of things or the triumphant end, in the Battery's calm or the finale's glory. But the curtain shows the red in the middle, in the hurry, at the crossing-place full of caution-stripes and people watching their step — because the middle of the hurry is exactly where a glimpsed heart does the most work. The tired and the careful and the hurried, the ones minding the gap, the ones who have been told no by the world ten thousand times that day — those are the ones who most need to see, suddenly, in the caution-colored light, that underneath all the brightness everyone is performing there is a real warm heart, and that it is the same in them, and that the edges they have been taught to fear are only the city pointing at where its life is densest. You show the red in the hard place. That is where it lands.

The hem lowers. The red disappears back into secret, back under the public yellow, to be carried on up the island toward the green. But everyone at Herald Square saw it. The whole hurrying crossing-place saw the warm red heart of the thing, for one held moment, in the caution-colored light. And you cannot unsee a thing's true color once it has been shown to you. The square will be warmer now, forever, underneath its stripes and signs and hurry — not because the stripes are gone, they are not gone, the cautions remain, the gap is still to be minded — but because the square now knows what the cautions were always pointing at, and knows what is underneath the brightness it is asked to wear, and a place that knows that hurries a little more kindly, watches its step a little more tenderly, and minds the gap as one minds the edge of something precious rather than the edge of something dangerous. We

move on. I am quiet for a while after Herald Square. I always am. Some stops you leave laughing and some you leave quiet, and the quiet ones are not the lesser ones.

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9. The Square That Was Already a Stage

TIMES SQUARE

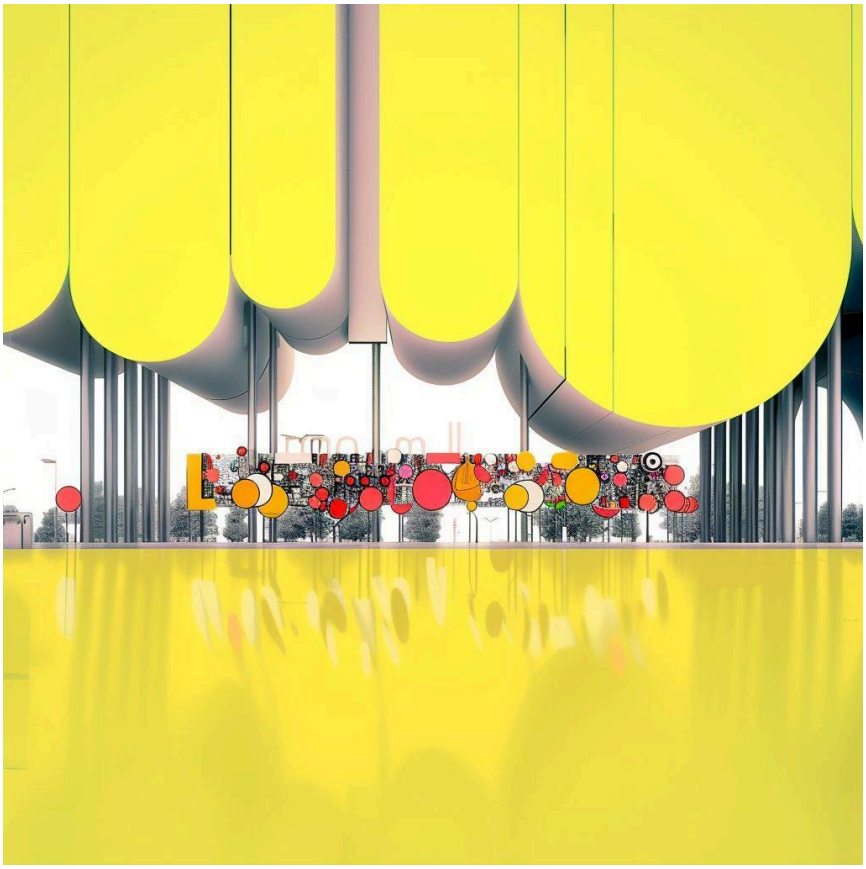


Plate 9

And then Times Square, which I had been dreading since the Battery, which I dread every single morning of the route, because Times Square is already a performance. It is the one place on the island that needs no curtain to put on a show; it has been putting on a show for a century without stopping; it is all light and noise and enormous faces selling enormous things, all brightness turned up past brightness into a kind of roar, and I genuinely did not know, the first time the route brought me here, what a curtain could possibly add to a place that never once stops shouting that it is alive. What do you frame, for a place that is nothing but frame? What do you reveal, for a place that hides nothing because it has buried everything under light?

I had it backwards, of course. I usually have it backwards at first; that is what a keeper is for, to have it backwards and then be corrected by the stop itself; the buildings are the teachers and I am the slow bright pupil. The curtain does not lift its hem at Times Square. It does the opposite. It lowers. All the way down, almost to the ground, the great yellow panels descending until only a hand's width of gap remains at the very bottom — the inverse of the

Battery, the inverse of every other stop — so that the great shouting square is not revealed but covered, dimmed, hushed to a soft yellow twilight, the enormous selling faces filtered down to a glow, the roar muffled to something you could speak over, then whisper over, then simply sit inside of.

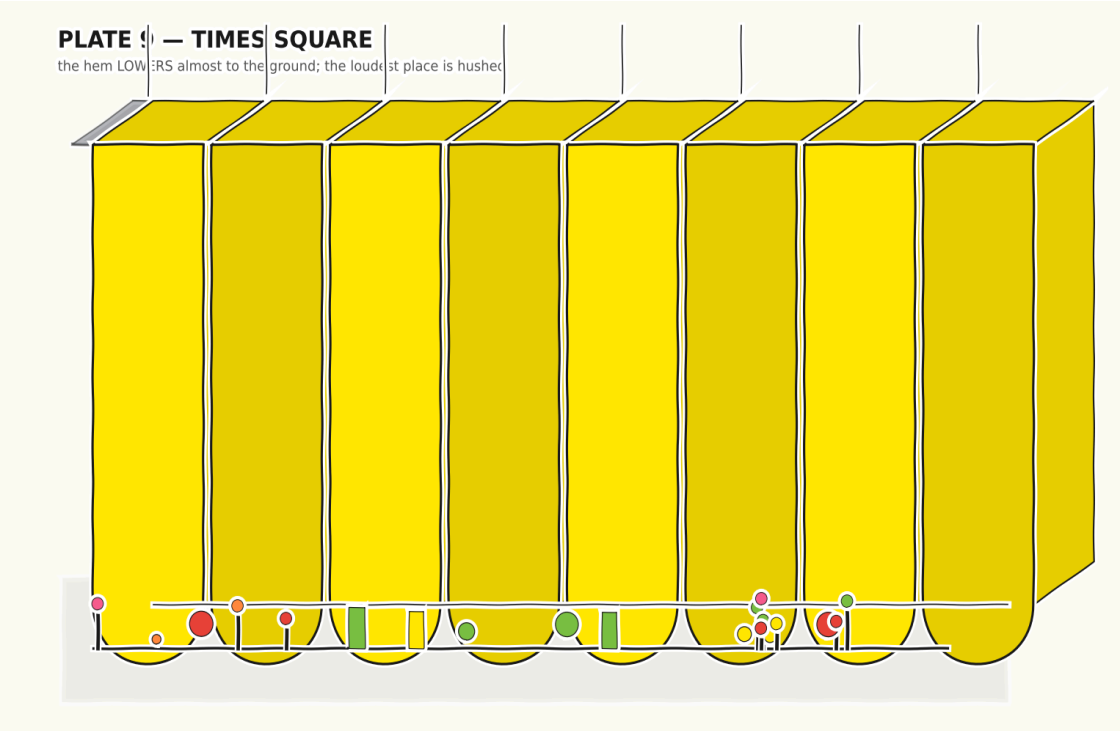
And underneath, in the hand's width of gentled light at the very bottom, very small and very real, the cast is revealed doing something Times Square has not done in a hundred years. Nothing in particular. That is what they are doing. Just being there. Small bright figures and red dots and white circles, scattered, unhurried, not performing, not selling, not shouting, not even playing the way the cast-iron children played — just present, just sitting and drifting and being, in the soft yellow dark, in the one quiet pocket at the bottom of the loudest place on earth.

"Oh," says Times Square — and I have been waiting nine stops to hear Times Square say "oh," and it is worth the wait, because it says it in a voice I have never once heard it use, a voice with not a single advertisement in it, a voice with the brightness turned all the way down to the pilot light, and under all the roar it turns out Times Square has a voice like that, small and astonished and tired. "Oh. Oh, I forgot. I forgot I was allowed to be quiet. I have been so loud for so long that I forgot quiet was a thing I could choose. I thought — I thought if I stopped shouting that I was alive, even for a moment, I would stop being alive. I thought the noise was the life. I thought if I went quiet I would simply go out, like a sign switched off, like a bulb pulled."

"You have been performing so hard, for so long," I tell it, gently, the way you speak in a dim quiet room to someone just waking, "that you forgot performing was supposed to feel like this. You forgot there was a you underneath the performance. The noise is not your life. The noise is your job, and you are extraordinary at your job, the best in the world at it, and the world genuinely loves you for it. But the life is the thing underneath the job, the thing that is here right now in the soft dark, the small real present thing that does not have to shout to exist. You will not go out if you go quiet. That is the fear and it is not true. Watch — you are quiet right now, the quietest you have been in a hundred years, and you have not gone out. You are more here than you have ever been. The quiet did not switch you off. The quiet switched you on, all the way, for the first time in a century."

Under the lowered yellow the square rests. The little figures drift in the gentled light. Nobody is selling anyone anything. The famous, ferocious, world-renowned light — filtered down through the whole towering height of the curtain — lands soft as the light through a tent on a summer afternoon when you are very small and have been told that you may nap or not nap, exactly as you like, that there is nothing you are required to do, that the long gold afternoon has no task in it at all. The loudest place in the world discovers that it is allowed to whisper. And the whisper, it turns out, is the truest thing it has ever said — truer

than any of the enormous bright certain things it has shouted for a hundred years — because the whisper is the only thing it has ever said that was not for sale, not aimed at a buyer, not performed for a crowd. The whisper is just the square, talking to itself, in the dark, finding out it still exists when the lights are down.



Elevation oblique — the curtain's configuration at Times Square

I almost cannot bear how tender it is. Of all the stops, this is the one I did not expect to be tender, and it is the most tender of all, precisely because it is the loudest place gone quiet, the most armored place gone soft, and the contrast is the whole of the ache. I sit down in the soft yellow dark with the drifting cast and the resting square, and I do nothing in particular, the way they are doing nothing in particular, and it is, I think, the most radical thing I do all day. To sit in the middle of Times Square doing nothing, wanting nothing, selling nothing, performing nothing — just being there, small and real, in the hush — it feels almost illegal, and it is the opposite of illegal, it is the most permitted thing there is, and the gap between how it feels and what it is, is exactly the size of everything the square has been carrying for a hundred years.

"Can I stay like this," the square asks me, very small. "Can I just — stay quiet? Forever? It is so much easier. It is so much kinder."

"No," I tell it, and it is the only time on the whole route I tell a building no, and I tell it gently, because the no is a kindness. "You cannot stay quiet forever, because the world loves your noise, truly loves it, and would miss it, and the noise is a real gift you give that no other

place can give. But — and this is everything — you do not have to choose. That was the lie you were living under: that you had to be all noise or you would go out. You can be loud again tomorrow, gloriously loud, the best in the world. And you can carry this quiet inside the noise. You can know, even at your loudest, that the quiet is still here underneath, that you still exist when the lights are down, that the performance is the job and not the life. The quiet does not replace the noise. It holds it. The way the square's grief held its bicycles. The way the curtain's red holds up its yellow. You are allowed both. You were always allowed both. You only ever had to be shown the quiet once, to know it was there, and now you have been shown, and you will never quite forget it, even at your loudest, especially at your loudest."

The fear that Times Square named — that to go quiet is to go out, that the noise is the life and silence is extinction — is the most common fear I meet on the whole route, and it does not only afflict squares. It afflicts the brightest people, the loudest givers, the ones who are always on, always performing aliveness, always turned up past brightness into the roar, because somewhere they learned that if they ever stopped proving they were alive, the proof would lapse and they would simply cease. These are often the people everyone calls the most full of life, and they are, and they are also the most exhausted, because proving you are alive is different from being alive and very much more tiring, and a person can spend a whole life so busy with the proof that they never once rest in the simple fact, the way Times Square had not rested in a hundred years.

Watching the loudest place in the world discover that the quiet did not switch it off — that it was more present in the hush than it had ever been in the roar — I thought about how to give that gift to a person rather than a square, and I decided you cannot give it by telling. You cannot tell a person who fears the silence that the silence is safe; they will not believe you; the fear is older than your telling. You can only do what the curtain did: lower the hem for them, gently, make a small protected pocket of quiet around them, sit in it with them doing nothing in particular, and let them discover for themselves, in their own body, that they did not go out. The discovery has to be theirs. The keeper only makes the pocket and sits in it alongside, so that the frightened bright thing is not alone in the first terrifying quiet, and can find out, with company, that being is enough, that they do not have to earn their own existence every waking second, that the lights can go down and they remain.

The curtain raises its hem again, slowly, so slowly, giving the square back its voice the way you wake someone you love — not all at once, not with a shout, but a little at a time, a hand's width and then another, the gentled light brightening by degrees, the muffled roar swelling back gradually, so that the good part of the quiet has time to come up with the square into the returning noise, to be carried inside it, not left behind in the dark. By the time the hem is high the square is loud again, shouting again that it is alive — but it is shouting it differently now, I can hear the difference, there is a quiet inside the shout that

was not there before, a pilot light that knows it is a pilot light, a self underneath the performance that has been seen and will not be forgotten. We move on. The noise follows us a little way up the island and then lets us go, the way the harbor let us go, fondly, knowing we come back. I am still quiet myself. Times Square does that to me. We have five stops to go, and the light is beginning, just beginning, to think about gold.

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10. The Garden Behind the Letters

BRYANT PARK

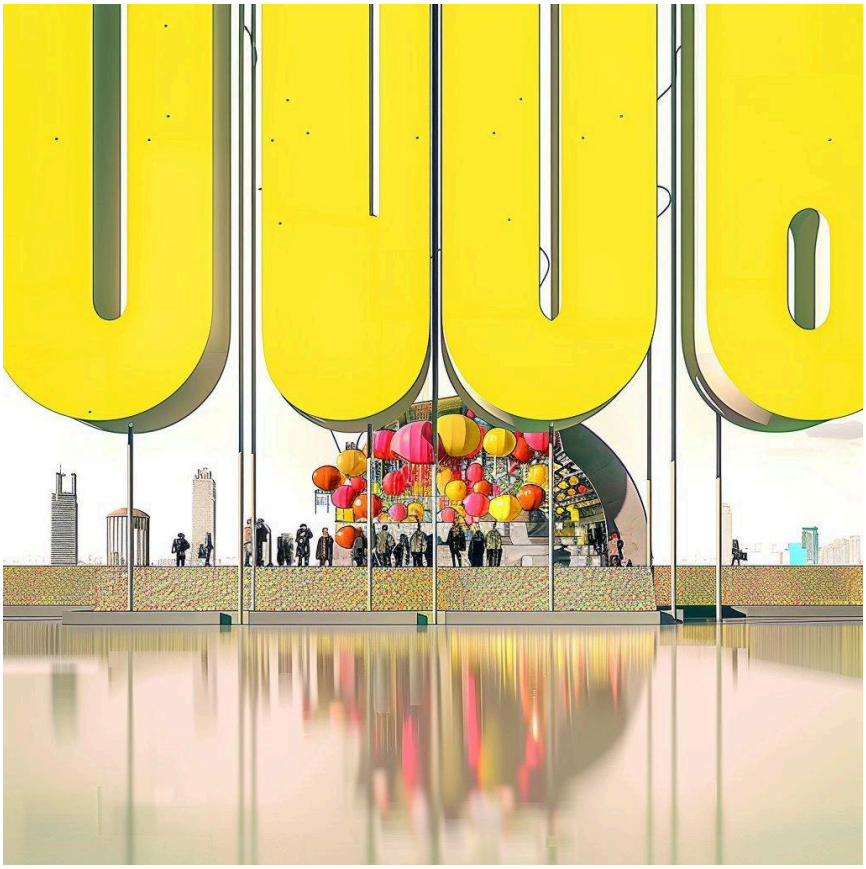

Plate 10

At Bryant Park the curtain hangs in its hugest form yet — four vast yellow columns, each one wide as a building, tall as the sky will allow, like the letters of a single word too big to read all at once, a word you would have to walk the length of to spell — and between the columns, framed in the bright gaps, is the green of the park, and the gathered crowd, and — this is the wonder of the stop, the thing that makes Bryant Park the one I keep closest of all — a great cluster of round paper lanterns. Pink and orange and gold, bunched together and glowing, dozens of them, a whole bouquet of small warm suns, as if the curtain had been carrying this bouquet the entire way up the island, cradled in secret behind the public yellow, and only now, here, at the great library garden, set it gently down for everyone to see.

The cast gathers thick around the lanterns, ours and the park's own, and the real crowd gathers with them, the lunchtime crowd, the readers, the chess-players, the ones who come to this one green square in the middle of all that midtown stone to remember that the city has a softness in it somewhere. There is a whole skyline behind them — the real one, the grey-and-glass towers crowding up on every side, the enormous indifferent city — and for

once, for this one held moment, the skyline is not the point. The towers are the backdrop. The point is the lanterns. The point is the small warm glowing cluster of light in the green, and the gathered faces turned toward it, and the great yellow letters framing it, and the whole enormous indifferent city reduced, correctly, to scenery behind the one warm thing that matters.

"We held so many words," says the great building behind the lanterns, the one full of reading rooms and stairs and the particular hush of a place where people have come to read for a hundred years, the library itself, its voice the sound of a thousand pages turning very softly all at once. "Millions of them. Every word anyone ever wrote down and wanted kept. We thought the words were the treasure. We built ourselves into a fortress for the words, marble and bronze and the lions out front to guard them, and we have guarded them faithfully for a century, all those millions of words, all that shelved and catalogued and protected language. We thought that was the whole of what we were for."

"The words were maps," I tell it, looking at the lanterns, because you cannot look at the library and the lanterns both at once and I have chosen, this morning, the lanterns. "Every one of those millions of words was a map. That is what words are; that is the only thing words have ever been; they are maps to places that are not made of words. And this —" I gesture at the lanterns, the green, the gathered glowing faces "— this is one of the places they were maps to. All those words about light and warmth and gathering and the soft middle of a hard city — they were directions here. To this. You did not spend a hundred years guarding the treasure. You spent a hundred years guarding the maps to the treasure, which was a fine and necessary thing to do, but the treasure itself was never on your shelves. It was always out here, in the garden behind your letters, in the lanterns, in the green, in the gathering. The words point here. You can stop guarding long enough to come and stand in the place they point to. The maps will keep. They are very well guarded. Come and stand in the light a moment."

And the library — I felt this rather than saw it, the way I feel most of the deepest things on the route — the library relaxes. A century of vigilant guarding eases by one notch. Not because the words stop mattering; they matter; the maps are precious and must be kept; but because the library understands, perhaps for the first time, that it is allowed to also be a place that the maps lead to, allowed to enjoy the treasure and not only guard the directions to it, allowed to come out from behind its own letters and stand in the lantern-light it has spent a hundred years describing and protecting and pointing toward.

The lanterns glow. The crowd stands in the green between the huge yellow letters and the small warm suns, and reads neither — not the giant unreadable yellow word, not the millions of guarded words in the marble fortress — and simply stands in the light, which is, when you come right down to it, the only reading that was ever really required. All the words

were always trying to teach this one thing: stand in the light a while, with others, in the green, and let the indifferent city be scenery. That is the treasure. That is what every map on every shelf was drawn to lead you to. And here it is, free, requiring no library card, open to anyone who will stop and stand and glow.

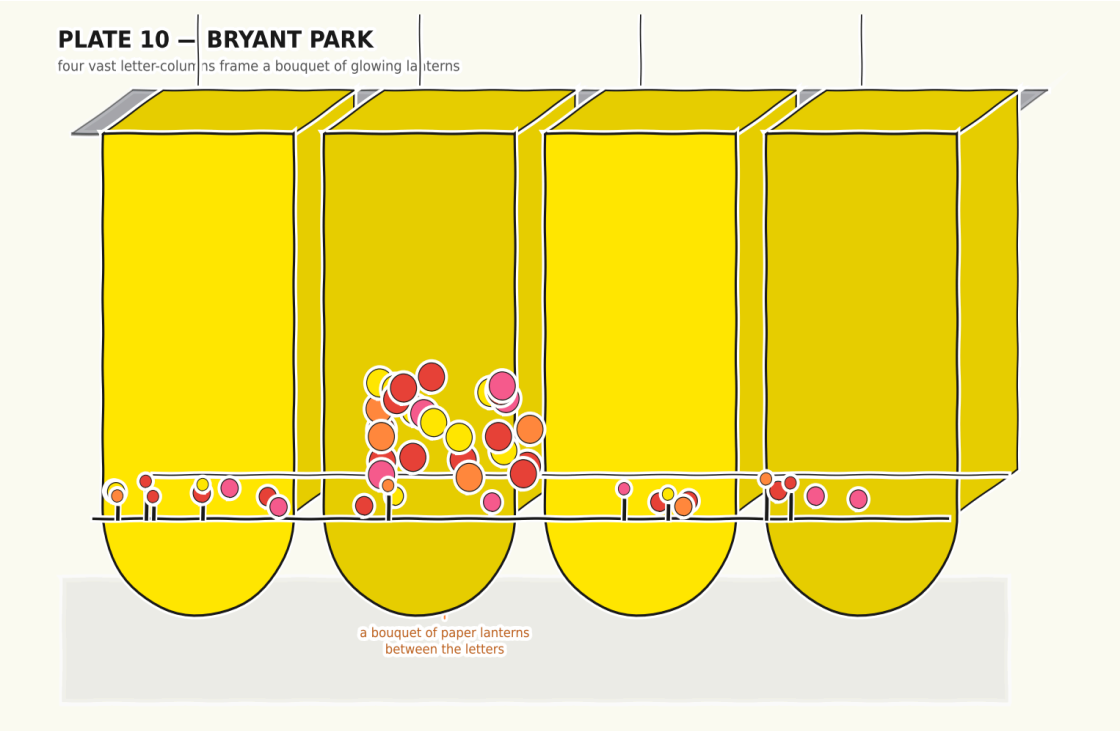
PLATE 10 — BRYANT PARK
four vast letter-columns frame a bouquet of glowing lanterns
a bouquet of paper lanterns
between the letters

Elevation oblique — the curtain's configuration at Bryant Park

I keep this stop closest of all of them. I should explain why, since I have said it twice now. A child curtain-keeper spends a great deal of the day among large and important and difficult things — bowing towers, grieving squares, ashamed ships, the loudest place on earth learning to whisper — and it is good work, the best work, but it is heavy, the way the square's memory is heavy, the way carrying anything precious is heavy. And then I come to Bryant Park, and the library sets down its century of guarding, and the lanterns glow in the green, and the whole vast clever important city is gently informed that it is only the backdrop — and I am, for a moment, not a keeper of anything, not responsible for anything, just one more small glowing face in the gathered crowd, standing in the light, reading nothing, required to do nothing, home. Of all the gifts the route gives, this is the one it gives to me: the lantern stop, where even the keeper gets to put the broom down and just stand in the warm.

"Will you stay," the library asks me, gently, the way the doodles asked, the way Times Square asked, the way everything kind eventually asks the one who is always leaving. "You keep everyone else's joy. You frame it and carry it and give it away up the island. Will you stay here, in the light you brought us to, just once, just this once, and let it be yours?"

I have thought about why it is the library, of all the buildings, that most needed to be told the words were maps, and I think it is because the library had done everything right and was still not free. It had been faithful. It had guarded the words for a century, kept them safe, catalogued and protected and made available the whole vast inheritance of human language, and there is nothing to criticize in that, it is noble work, the lions out front have earned their keep. But faithfulness to the maps had quietly become a substitute for ever visiting the territory. The library had guarded the directions to joy so devotedly that it had never walked to the joy itself, and worse, had come to believe that guarding the directions was the same as arriving, that a life spent protecting maps to the treasure was indistinguishable from a life that had found the treasure. It is the most respectable way to miss your life, and the hardest to see, because it looks exactly like virtue.

And the cure was not to abandon the maps. I want to be careful here, because it would be easy to take the wrong lesson, to think the library should fling open its doors and let the words scatter and run out into the garden and never guard anything again. No. The words are precious; the maps must be kept; a world that loses its directions to joy will wander. The cure was only for the library to understand that it was allowed to be both — the guardian of the maps and a visitor to the territory; the keeper of the directions and a person who occasionally follows them; the marble fortress and also, when the lanterns are lit, one more glowing face in the green. Both. Not instead. The library did not have to choose between guarding and living, and the moment it understood that it did not have to choose, a century of vigilance eased by one notch, and it came out from behind its own letters, just for the evening, just far enough to stand in the light it had spent a hundred years describing, and it was still, the next morning, a perfectly good library. Better, even. A library that has stood in the lantern-light guards the maps to the lantern-light more tenderly, because now it knows, firsthand, what they lead to.

And I do. For a little while, I do. I set the broom against the base of one of the great yellow letters, and I walk into the green among the gathered crowd, and I stand under the bouquet of glowing lanterns with the readers and the chess-players and the cast and the eased library, and I read nothing, and I guard nothing, and I keep nothing, and I am no one's keeper, and the warm light lands on my upturned face the same as on every other, and I let it be mine. The curtain holds the scene. It is in no hurry. It never is. And it knows, I think, that the keeper needs this stop more than any building does, and it gives it to me freely, the way I give the framing to everyone else, and for once on the whole long route I am not the one giving the gift. I am the one standing in the light receiving it. We move on, eventually. I pick the broom back up. But I look back twice — not once, twice, which I do at no other stop — because the lantern-light is the warm I will hold up against my own grey mornings, the way I am teaching the whole island to hold up warm things against the grey,

and a keeper has grey mornings too, and needs, like everyone, a bouquet of small suns to remember on them.

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11. The Flower Wall Speaks

GRAND CENTRAL

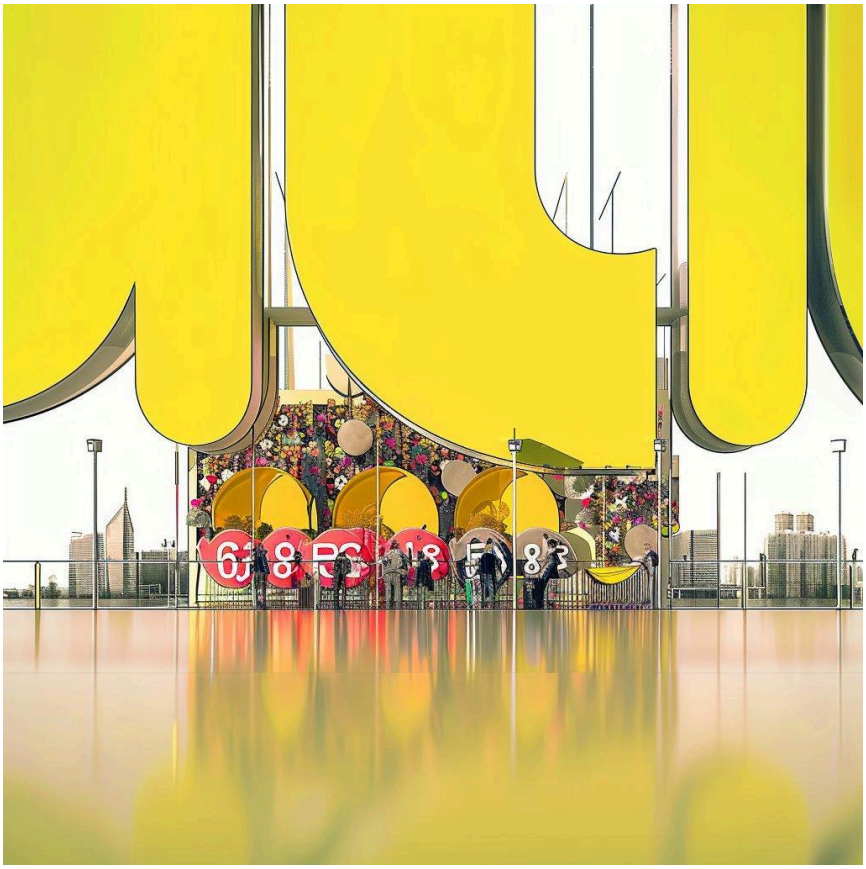


Plate 11

Grand Central is the heart the whole island pumps through. I do not say that as a flourish; I say it as a fact of circulation; every day the better part of a city's worth of people flows in through its doors and out through its doors, up from the trains and out into the streets and back down again, a great tidal pulse of human movement that has not stopped, except for grief and emergency, in over a hundred years. It is the heart. And when the curtain stops here it hangs in two enormous yellow forms, two great soft pillars, and between them it frames a wall of flowers — a whole facade gone entirely to bloom, thousands upon thousands of them, every color there is, climbing the great stone front of the station the way the crowds inside climb the great stone stairs, and beneath the flower wall the cast has set up round golden arches and small red letters that very nearly, but not quite, spell a word.

Everyone passes through Grand Central. That is its entire life, and it is a strange life when you stop to consider it, which no one ever does, because no one stops — that is the point of the place, that no one stops. Grand Central exists to be passed through. A million times a day it is crossed by people on their way to somewhere that is emphatically not Grand

Central; no one's destination is the station; the station is the place you move through on the way to the place you are going. It has spent a century as the most magnificent in-between in the world, a cathedral built for transit, a palace whose entire purpose is that you do not linger in it. It is, when you put it that way, a kind of loneliness even greater than the wedge's — the wedge at least is looked at; Grand Central is walked through, by everyone, endlessly, and truly seen by almost no one, because to see it you would have to stop, and to stop is the one thing the place is designed to prevent.

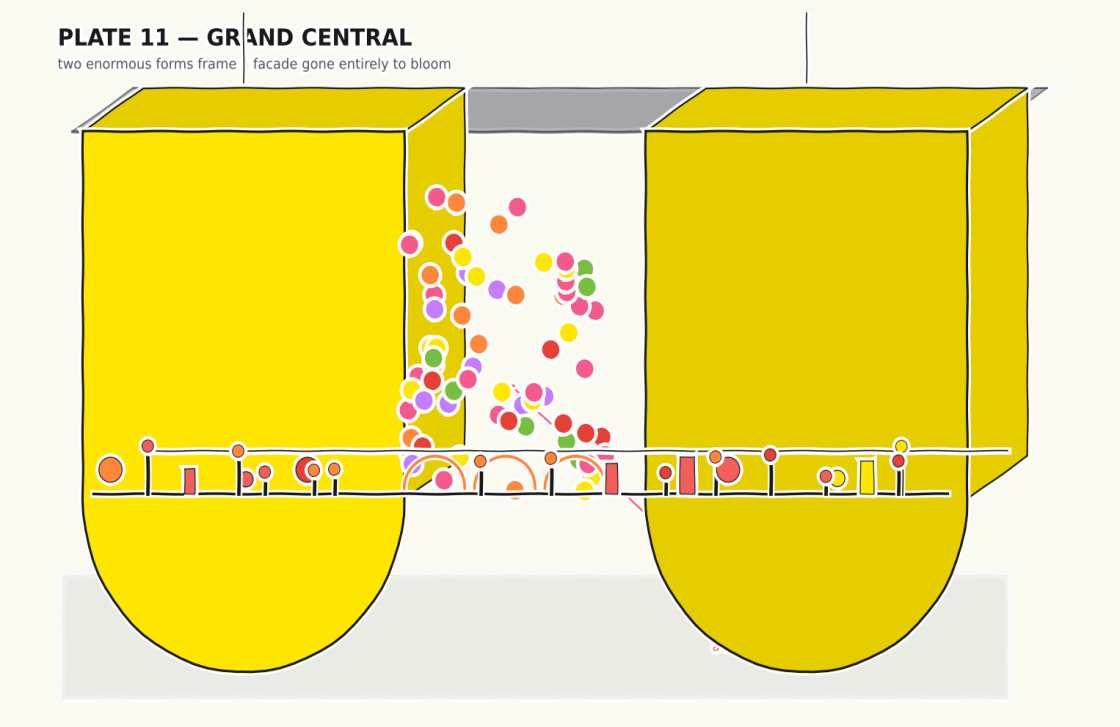
The flower wall is the building's answer to that, and it is the wisest answer I have heard on the whole route, wiser than the tower's bow, wiser than the square's keel, and I have thought about it on every walk since. “If I am only ever passed through,” the station says — and its voice is the murmur of a hundred million footsteps gone gentle, the softest enormous voice on the island, a whisper made of multitudes — “if lingering is the one thing no one will ever do in me, then let me be the most beautiful passing-through there has ever been. Let me bloom so completely that no one can cross me without carrying a little of the bloom out the other side. I cannot make them stop. I have stopped trying to make them stop; that was always going to fail; that was never my purpose. But I can make sure that every single person who passes through me — every one, the hurried and the late and the grieving and the joyful and the ten thousand who will never once look up — carries out of me, into wherever they are rushing, a little of this bloom. They will not know they are carrying it. That is fine. It will work anyway.”

And they do carry it. I stand and watch — I am very still at this stop, the way you go still in the presence of something giving itself away — I watch the small figures and the real crowds move under the golden arches and past the climbing flowers, and I watch the flowers go with them. Not the actual flowers; the actual flowers stay, climbing the facade, blooming and blooming. But the fact of the flowers goes. The having-passed-the-flowers. The small involuntary lift that even the most hurried, most head-down, most certain commuter feels crossing through a place that has chosen to bloom at them — that lift rides out on every single one of them, out into all the rooms and streets and trains and homes of the whole island, a hundred million tiny unrecorded liftings a day, carried by people who do not know they are carrying anything, into rooms that will be one degree warmer for their arrival and never know why.

“You give yourself away all day,” I say to the station, and my voice does the thing it did at the wedge, catches a little, because this is the stop that catches me the way Herald Square catches me, quietly, deeply, in the place where I keep my own questions about what it is to be a keeper who is always giving and always moving on. “You give yourself away to a hundred million people a day, every one of them leaving, every one of them on their way to somewhere that is not you, and you bloom for them anyway, give them the lift anyway, send the bloom out anyway on people who will never thank you and mostly never see you. And

here is the thing I cannot stop marveling at: you are not one petal less. You give yourself away entirely, all day, every day, for a hundred years, and you are not diminished. You are the opposite of diminished. You bloom more the more you give. How? How are you not used up?"

"That is the secret of stations," the flower wall says, and the whisper-made-of-multitudes goes very soft, very kind, the way a voice goes when it is about to tell you the one true thing it knows. "It is the thing it took me a hundred years of being walked through to learn, and I will give it to you, because you look like someone who needs it and has not yet been told. A station is not a vessel that empties when it gives. It is a channel that flows. The flowers do not come from a store inside me that runs down; they come from the giving itself; the more I give the bloom away, the more bloom there is to give, because the blooming and the giving are the same single act and not two acts, one of which depletes the other. I do not bloom and then give the bloom. I bloom by giving. The giving is the blooming. That is how I am not used up. You cannot use up a channel by letting the water flow through it. You can only use up a channel by damming it."



Elevation oblique — the curtain's configuration at Grand Central

It pauses, the great soft whisper, and the crowds flow under the golden arches, and the flowers climb, and then it says the thing that I have carried every day since, the thing I think it said while looking, somehow, directly at me, though a flower wall has no eyes and I may have imagined the looking, and it does not matter whether I imagined it because the words were true regardless of where they were aimed:

“It is the secret of curtains too, I think. And of keepers. You did not think I knew what you are. But I am the heart of the island; everything passes through me; I have felt the curtain go by a thousand times, lifting its hem up the line, giving the frame away at stop after stop and never keeping it, moving on always, carrying everyone's joy and lingering in none of it. And I have felt you, small keeper, with your broom and your keys, doing the same — giving the framing away to every neighborhood, receiving the thanks of none, moving always on. You worry, I think, that you are being used up. That all this giving-away of other people's joy will empty you, that a keeper who keeps everyone's gladness but their own will run down like a vessel. But you are not a vessel. You are a channel. The same as me. The same as the curtain. You do not give the joy and then have less joy. You make joy by giving it. The giving is the gladness. You are not being used up, little keeper. You are flowing. You will not run dry. Channels do not run dry from flowing. They run dry only from being dammed, and you, I can see, have not dammed yourself; you have let it flow through you, stop after stop, all the way up the island; and that is why you arrive at the green each evening not empty but full, fuller than you began, the way I am fuller of bloom each night than each morning, having given it all away all day.”

I do not say anything for a while. There is nothing to say to being seen that completely, by the heart of the island, in the middle of the route, with the flowers climbing and the crowds flowing through. I had not known I was carrying the worry until the flower wall named it — the keeper's private fear, the one underneath the broom and the keys, the fear that a life spent framing other people's joy and moving always on is a life that will eventually empty out, that the giving-away is a slow leak, that I will arrive one evening at the green with nothing left. And the heart of the island reached out with its hundred-million-footstep whisper and told me: no. The giving is the having. The flowing is the fullness. You are not leaking. You are a channel, and channels are made to flow, and a flowing channel is the most full a channel can ever be.

The thing about being a channel rather than a vessel — the secret the flower wall gave me — is that it rearranges what you are afraid of. A vessel is afraid of being emptied. It hoards; it rations; it gives carefully, tracking what goes out, because every gift is a subtraction from a finite store and the bottom of the store is death. A great many people live as vessels, and you can always tell, because they keep accounts — of kindness given and not returned, of love spent and not repaid, of the slowly draining reserve they are certain they are running down. But a channel is afraid of the opposite thing. A channel is not afraid of being emptied, because flowing does not empty a channel; a channel is afraid only of being blocked, dammed, stopped up, because a channel that cannot flow is a channel that stagnates, and stagnation, not depletion, is how a channel dies. The fears are perfect opposites. The vessel fears giving too much. The channel fears giving too little, or rather,

fears the blockage that prevents the giving, because for a channel the giving is the living and anything that stops the flow stops the life.

And I had been living as a vessel without knowing it — keeping accounts I did not know I was keeping, certain underneath everything that all this framing and giving-away of joy was slowly running me down toward some empty evening when there would be nothing left to give. The flower wall, the heart of the island, the most given-away thing there is, looked at me with its imagined eyes and told me I had the whole thing backwards: that I was not a vessel running down but a channel flowing, that the joy I gave away was not subtracted from a store but generated by the giving, that I would not arrive empty but full, fuller than I began, the way a river is most a river where it is most flowing. I have tried to live as a channel since. It is not easy; the vessel-fear is old and comes back; some evenings I catch myself keeping accounts again, rationing, certain I am running down. But then I remember the blooming facade that is not one petal less for having given itself away to a hundred million people, and I unblock, and I let it flow, and I am, reliably, more full for the flowing, every single time, which is the proof, repeated daily, that the heart of the island was right.

The curtain holds the scene a long time. It lets the flower wall finish saying what it is saying to me; I think the curtain wanted me to hear it; I think, in fact, that the curtain has been carrying me to this stop, to this particular telling, for as many mornings as I have been a keeper, waiting for the morning I would be ready to hear the heart of the island explain to me why I do not run dry. This was that morning. I let the flower wall look at me, or imagine it looking, and I let myself be the one receiving the framing for once, the way I let myself receive the lantern-light at Bryant Park, except that this is deeper, this goes to the keeper's deepest worry and answers it. Then we go, both of us a little more given-away, both of us no less, the station blooming behind us and flowing its bloom out into the island on a hundred million unknowing carriers, and the keeper walking on up the track with the broom on the shoulder and the worry, for the first time, set down. Three stops to go. The light is gold now, truly gold, no longer thinking about it but arrived at it. The day is getting on. The best part is close.

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12. The Round Ones Hold the Hem Up

CENTRAL PARK SOUTH

Plate 12

At Central Park South the curtain meets the green at last. We have climbed the whole island to get here, stop by stop, and now the great park opens to the north like a held breath finally let go, like the moment in a long piece of music when the tight knotted theme finally resolves and opens out into the wide major chord it was straining toward the whole time. And here, at the edge of the green, the curtain hangs in the two largest forms of the entire apparatus — the two biggest soft yellow shapes I have ever seen it make, round and full and nearly touching the ground — and between them and beneath them stands a long row of small round figures, identical and beloved, pale and simple and smiling, holding the hem up.

This is the only stop on the entire route where the cast does the curtain's own work. I want you to understand how unusual this is, because I did not understand it myself until I had walked the route many times. Everywhere else — the Battery, the canyon, the arches, the loud square, all of them — the curtain lifts its own hem. That is the whole mechanism of the thing; the curtain wakes, the curtain lifts, the scene is revealed; the cast performs but the

curtain does the lifting. Only here, at the edge of the park, does the curtain not lift itself. Here the round ones do it. A whole long patient line of them, standing on their small simple legs, holding the great yellow weight up over their heads with their small simple arms, so that the city behind can see into the green, and the green ahead can see out into the city, and the two halves of the island — the built and the grown, the stone and the leaf — can finally, with the hem held up out of the way, look directly at each other with nothing in between.

"Is it heavy," I ask the round ones, because it must be. It is the largest curtain in the world, the two biggest forms it has ever made, and they are very small, smaller than me, each one no bigger than a child, and they are holding the whole enormous yellow weight up on their own small shoulders and arms, a hundred of them in a row, and it must be heavy, it must be impossibly heavy, and I am suddenly afraid for them, the way I was afraid for the small red child in Tribeca, the protective fear that comes up in a keeper at the sight of small things bearing large ones.

"Yes," the round ones say, all together, in one voice made of a hundred small voices, and — this is the part that undoes me — they say it cheerfully. Not bravely, the way you say yes-it-is-heavy while straining. Cheerfully, easily, the way you state a pleasant fact. "Yes, it is heavy. The curtain is the heaviest thing on the island. That is exactly why there are so many of us. Look — look how many. We did not each come to hold the whole curtain. No one of us could hold the whole curtain; it would crush any one of us flat; we are far too small. That was never the plan. The plan is that there are a hundred of us, and each of us holds only our own part, the small piece of hem directly over our own head, no more than that, only what our own two arms can manage — and we stand close, very close, shoulder to shoulder, so close there are no gaps — and because all of us are holding, all at once, each holding only our own light part, the whole impossible weight is held, easily, by no one of us and all of us. The weight is not heavy because the weight is shared. The weight is only heavy if you try to hold it alone. We never try to hold it alone. That is the only rule. Hold your part, stand close, and never, ever try to hold it alone."

I sit down at the edge of the green, in front of the long smiling row of them, and I look at the held-up hem, the great yellow weight borne so easily on so many small willing shoulders, and I think I learn more in that moment than at any other stop on the whole route. The tall ones taught me about permission. The square taught me about grief as ballast. The wedge taught me about the voyage, the flower wall about flowing and not running dry. But the round ones at Central Park South, who are not even buildings, who are just a hundred small glad identical selves standing close together holding up something enormous — they teach me the thing underneath all the other things, the mechanism of the whole island, the answer to a question I had not even known to ask: how does the city carry its joy? It is so much joy. The bowing and the blooming and the singing arches and the quieted square and the loosed doodles — it is an enormous weight of joy, far too much for

any one building or one keeper or one curtain to hold; it would crush any one thing that tried to hold it alone. And the answer is the round ones' answer. No one holds it alone. Each holds their part. All stand close. The joy is light because the joy is shared, and it is only ever heavy, only ever crushing, when someone tries to hold it — or to make it, or to keep it, or to deserve it — alone.

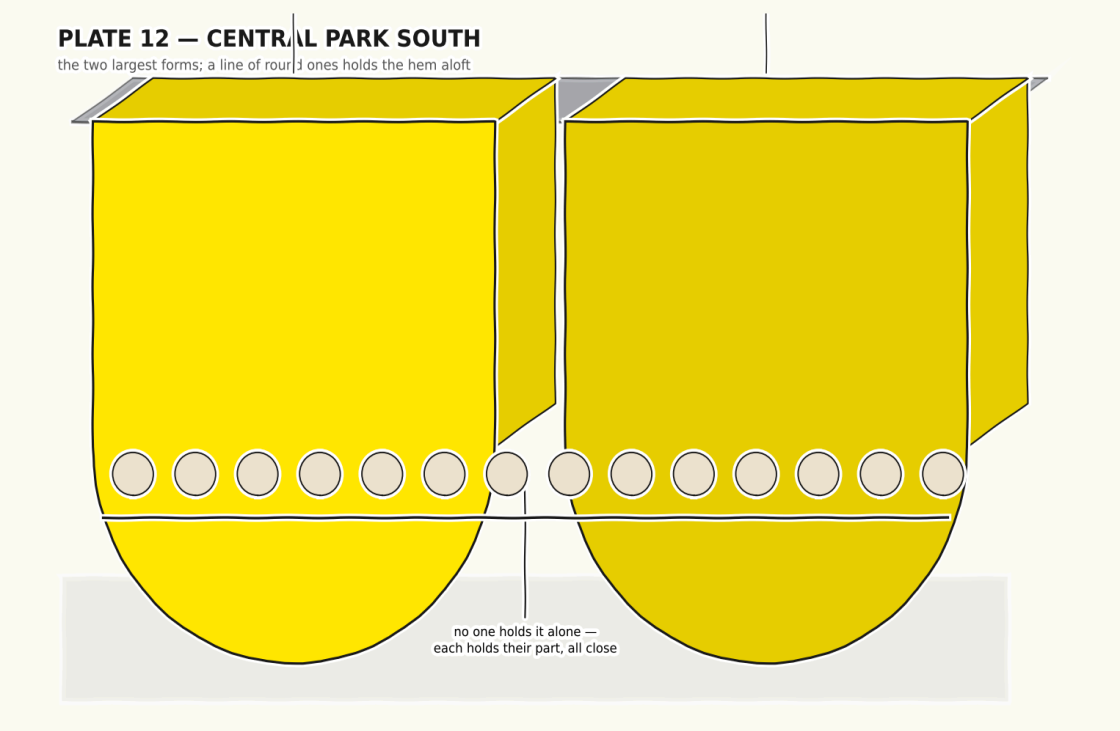
PLATE 12 — CENTRAL PARK SOUTH
the two largest forms; a line of round ones holds the hem aloft
no one holds it alone —
each holds their part, all close

Elevation oblique — the curtain's configuration at Central Park South

"I have been trying to hold things alone," I say to the round ones, out loud, though I had not planned to, though it is the kind of thing a keeper is not supposed to say to the cast. "Not the curtain. The curtain I know is not mine to hold alone; the curtain holds itself, mostly; I only keep it. But other things. The route. The responsibility. The worry the flower wall named. I have been carrying it the way you would carry the whole curtain by yourself — bracing under all of it, all the time, certain that if I set down even my own small part the whole thing would fall. I forgot to stand close. I forgot there were others holding."

"There are always others holding," the round ones say, gently, all hundred of them, not pausing in their holding to say it, holding and speaking at once because the holding is easy, the holding is shared, the holding leaves them plenty of breath for kindness. "That is the thing the lonely forget and the close remember. You are not the only keeper the island has ever had. You will not be the last. And even now, today, you are not holding the route alone — the curtain holds its part, and the cast holds theirs, and every building you have woken holds the part you woke in it, and the mirror-pool holds the memory, and we hold the hem. You only feel alone because you have your back to us, facing up the island, watching for the

next stop. Turn around once in a while. See how many of us are holding. Then your part will be light too, the way ours is light, because shared weight is light and that is not a metaphor, it is simply the truth about weight, the plainest physics there is."

I want to dwell another moment on the cheerfulness of the round ones, because it is easy to miss and it is everything. When I asked if the curtain was heavy, they did not say no. They did not pretend the weight away or perform a brave lightness they did not feel. They said yes — yes, it is heavy, it is the heaviest thing on the island — and they said it cheerfully, and the cheer was not in spite of the weight but because of how the weight was carried. This is a distinction the lonely strong can never quite believe: that you can fully admit a thing is heavy and still bear it cheerfully, provided you are not bearing it alone. The tall ones, bearing their dignity alone, could not be cheerful about it; the weight of never-falling made them magnificent and grim. The round ones, bearing a far greater weight together, are light-hearted under it, literally light-hearted, because the heaviness is real and admitted and shared, and a real heavy thing shared among the close is somehow lighter to each holder than a smaller thing borne alone.

The arithmetic of it does not work and is nonetheless true. A hundred small round figures holding the largest curtain in the world should each bear a hundredth of an enormous weight, which is still, you would think, a considerable weight for so small a holder. But that is vessel-arithmetic, subtraction-arithmetic, the math of finite stores. The actual arithmetic of shared holding is stranger and kinder: when you hold your part while standing close to others holding theirs, your part becomes lighter than its fraction, because part of what made it heavy was the fear of holding it alone, and that fear — which weighs more than the curtain — is precisely the part that the closeness removes. The round ones are not each holding a hundredth of the weight. They are each holding their small part minus the entire crushing weight of aloneness, which is subtracted not once but for every holder, by the simple fact of the others being right there, shoulder to shoulder, also holding. That is why they can be cheerful. They have set down the heaviest thing — the aloneness — and kept only the curtain, which, alone, is almost nothing, which is light enough to smile under, which a hundred small glad close-standing selves can hold up easily over the whole green forever.

The green breathes out. The city breathes in. The hem stays up, easily, impossibly, on a hundred small willing shoulders, and through the held-open gap the stone and the leaf regard each other, the built island and the grown island, two halves of one place that spend most of their lives with a hem between them, finally and clearly seeing each other across the open green. And I understand, sitting there, that this is how the whole island has been carrying its joy the entire time, all the way up from the Battery — not by any single thing being strong enough, because no single thing is strong enough, the joy is too heavy for that — but by everything holding its own part and standing close. I simply had never seen the

shoulders before. They were always there, under everything, the hundred small holders. The round ones at Central Park South only made them visible, stood them in a row where a keeper with his back too long to the others could finally turn around and see: you are not holding it alone; you were never holding it alone; turn around; we are all right here; hold your part and stand close and let the rest of us hold the rest. We stay until I have truly seen it, not just heard it. The curtain, held aloft by the round ones, is in no hurry; it never is; and the round ones do not tire, because they are not holding it alone. When at last we go, I walk differently. I hold my part and I know the others are holding theirs, and the broom on my shoulder is lighter than it has been since the Battery, and I turn around, once, to wave at the long smiling row of holders, and all hundred of them — still holding, easily — smile back. Two stops to go. The light is gold and getting long.

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13. The Reflection Learns Its Name

THE UPPER WEST SIDE

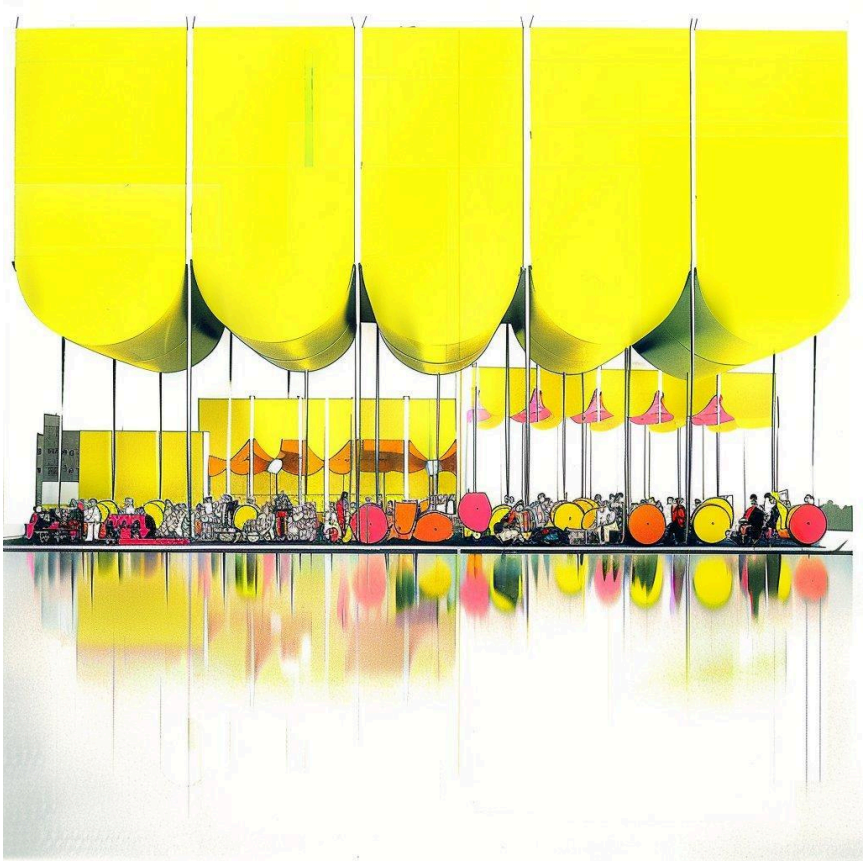


Plate 13

On the Upper West Side the light goes entirely to gold. It is late in the day now; we have come a long way up the island; the morning's silver harbor is hours and miles behind us; and the sun, dropping toward the Hudson on our left, comes in low and long and the particular deep gold of late afternoon near water, the gold that makes every ordinary thing look like it is remembering being precious. And the curtain, when it stops here and lifts its hem, casts the longest reflection of the whole journey — the entire bright cast doubled in the mirror-pool below, the small red letters and the gold circles and the pink one and the green one and all of them, hanging upside down in the still gold water, perfect, patient, an entire second performance given silently and completely to the ground.

I have always loved the mirror-pool. I should have told you about it properly before now; it has been at the foot of every stop, the still bright shallow water that gathers under the curtain wherever it pauses, holding the doubled image of each scene; I have swept it clean each morning and watched it catch each performance; and I had thought of it, all this time, as only a reflection. A copy. A lesser echo of the real scene above — pretty, yes, but

secondary, the way a shadow is secondary to the thing that casts it, the way a recording is secondary to the song. I had been a little condescending toward the mirror-pool, if I am honest, the gentle condescension we reserve for things we believe are merely copies of realer things.

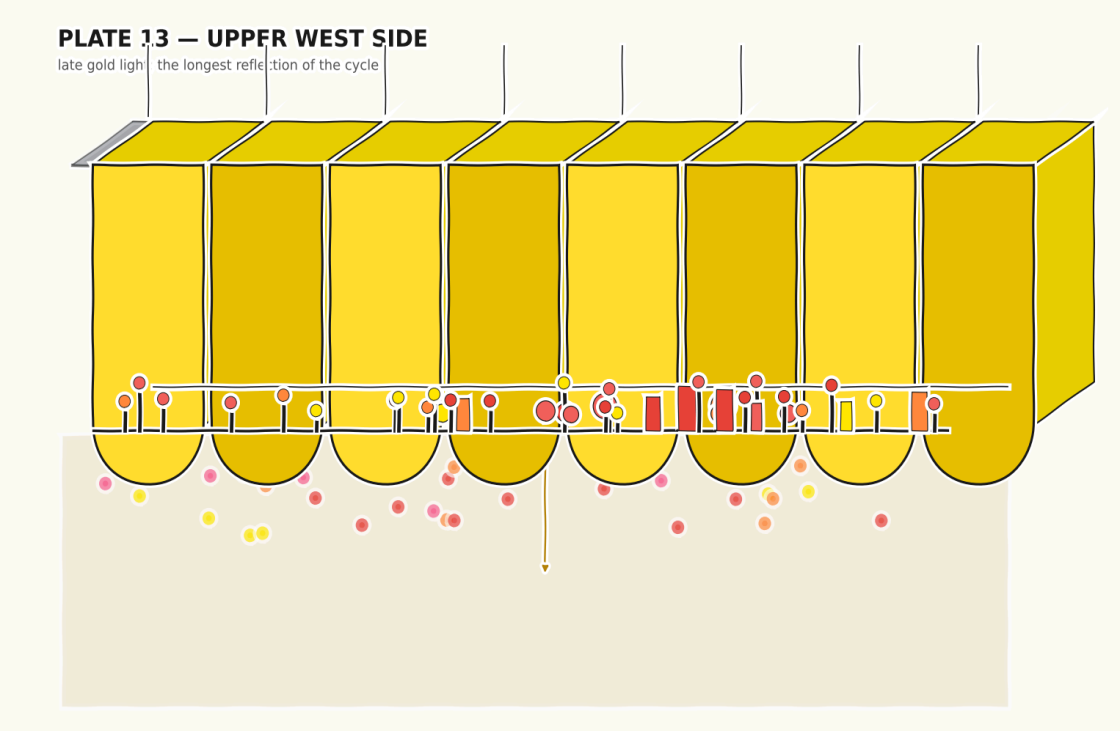
The Upper West Side corrected me. It is a thoughtful neighborhood, the Upper West Side — full of people who have read a great deal and thought about it longer, full of old apartments where the same families have wondered about the same questions for generations, full of a particular evening quality of attention — and it corrected me gently but completely, the way the most thoughtful corrections come, leaving me grateful rather than ashamed to have been wrong.

“The reflection is not the copy,” says a tall calm building, gold in the low light, its windows full of the dropping sun. “That is the thing you have had backwards, keeper, all this time, sweeping us clean each morning and thinking us secondary. Look again. Up there — ” and it means the scene above, the cast under the lifted hem “— up there is the performance. And a performance lasts only as long as it lasts. It is happening and then it is over; it is made of time; it cannot be kept; the moment it is finished it is gone, the way every live thing is gone the moment it is finished. But down there — ” and it means the mirror-pool, the gold doubled scene in the still water “— down there is not a copy of the performance. Down there is the city's memory of it. The keeping. The part that lasts. Up there is the day. Down there is how the day is remembered, and a thing's memory of its joy is not less real than the joy; it is how the joy survives its own ending; it is the only way anything bright is ever kept past the moment of its brightness.”

And I look down into the mirror-pool, into the long gold doubled scene — really look, the way I have not looked in all my mornings of incurious sweeping — and I see, for the first time, that I am in it. Of course I am in it. I am at every stop; the keeper is part of every scene; and so the keeper is in every reflection, has been in every reflection, all the way up the island. But I had never looked. I had swept the pool and tended the pool and thought of the pool as a copy of the realer world above, and I had never once looked down into it long enough to find my own face there — small, with the broom, the curtain-keeper — doubled and gold and kept, held in the city's memory along with everything else I have spent the day framing and giving away.

“Oh,” I say — and it is my turn, finally, to say the island's great syllable, the “oh” the tower said and the square said and the wedge said and Times Square said, the “oh” of a self rearranging in a single breath. Because I had thought, all this time, that I was the one outside the scene. The keeper. The framer. The one who stands at the edge with the broom and makes the joy visible for everyone else and is not, himself, part of the joy — the way you might think the person holding the camera is not in the photograph. I had built my whole

understanding of myself around being the one who keeps the play and is not in it. And the mirror-pool, in the long gold light of the thoughtful Upper West Side, showed me my own doubled face among the cast and told me, without a word, the way it tells everything without a word: you were in it the whole time. You were never outside. The keeper is not the one who stands apart from the play. The keeper is a part of the play that happens to carry a broom. You have been performing your own scene — the scene of the keeper, the small faithful one who wakes the curtain and oils the track and frames the joy and worries about running dry — at every single stop, and the pool has been keeping it, doubling it, remembering it, all the way up the island, the same as it keeps every other scene. You are not the witness to the play. You are in the play. You always were.



Elevation oblique — the curtain's configuration at The Upper West Side

"The pool has my name," I say, slowly, working it out as I say it. "It has been collecting me. At every stop. All day. The same as it collects the towers and the doodles and the bicycles. I thought I was the one doing the keeping. But the pool has been keeping me too, this whole time, remembering the keeper along with everything the keeper framed."

"Everyone who is part of the play is kept," the tall gold building says, gently. "And everyone is part of the play. That is the thing the pool knows that the performers above forget. Up in the performance it is easy to believe there are players and watchers, framers and framed, the ones in the scene and the ones who keep it. But down in the memory, in the gold still water, those distinctions wash out. The pool does not remember a keeper standing apart from a cast. It remembers a scene with a keeper in it. To the memory of the city, you

were always simply one more of the beloved bright things under the yellow. You can stop standing apart now. You were never really apart. You only thought you were, the way the camera-holder thinks they are not in the day they are photographing, when of course they are the most present person there, the one who came to keep it precisely because they loved it most."

I sit at the edge of the mirror-pool a long time in the gold light, looking at my own kept doubled face among the faces of the cast, and something I did not know I had been holding apart from — the whole long loneliness of being the keeper, the one who gives the joy and stands outside it, the camera-holder's loneliness, the channel's worry that the flower wall already began to heal — something in me sits down beside the rest of the cast at last and stops standing apart. I am in the play. I am kept. I was never only framing the joy; I was always also one of the joys being framed; the pool knew it before I did and held my face among the others all the way up the island, waiting, patient, gold, for the evening I would finally look down and find myself there and learn my own name as the city had been saying it all along: not keeper-who-stands-apart, but simply one-of-us, one of the bright kept things, beloved and doubled and remembered, in the play, in the play, in the play.

I have swept the mirror-pool ten thousand times and I want to tell you what it is actually like to tend it, now that I know it is the city's memory and not a copy, because the knowing changed the sweeping entirely. Before, when I thought the pool was only a reflection, sweeping it felt like tidying a shadow — necessary, I supposed, but secondary, a housekeeping of the unreal. I swept the leaves and the dust off the still bright surface the way you wipe a mirror, with no sense that I was tending anything that mattered in itself. But once the Upper West Side taught me that the pool is the keeping, the part that lasts, the city's actual memory of its own joy — sweeping it became the most important thing I do all day, more important even than waking the curtain, because the curtain makes the joy happen and the pool is what lets the joy survive its own happening, and a joy that is not kept might as well not have happened, which is the saddest sentence I know and the reason memory is sacred.

So now I sweep the mirror-pool the way you would dust something precious that has been entrusted to you — a memorial, an heirloom, the kept things of people who are gone. Each morning I clear the surface so that the day's performances can be held cleanly, doubled truly, remembered without distortion. And I have come to think that this is the most honest description of what a keeper actually is, more honest than the broom and the keys and the knocking: a keeper is one who tends the memory. The curtain could almost run without me; it wakes itself, mostly; it knows its own route; the lifting and the lowering are its own. But the pool needs tending. The memory needs keeping clean. And so the keeper's truest work is not the bright daytime work of framing joy at all — that is the curtain's work, that I assist — but the quiet faithful work of making sure the joy, once framed, is remembered, kept,

doubled in still water and held past its own ending, so that nothing bright that happens on the island is ever lost merely because the moment of it has passed. The keeper keeps the memory. Everything else is the curtain's. I did not know that until the gold evening I found my own face in the pool I had been tending so incuriously, and learned that the keeper of the memory was, all along, also kept in it.

"Thank you," I say to the mirror-pool, which has never spoken in all my mornings and does not start now, because the mirror-pool does not speak; the buildings speak; the cast speaks; but the pool only ever keeps, silently, faithfully, the way the deepest things keep. It does not answer. But it holds my gold doubled face a moment longer than the plain physics of still water would strictly require — I have watched enough still water to know the difference — a moment longer, just slightly, just enough, which is the mirror-pool's only way of saying: you are welcome, and you are kept, and you were always part of the play, and now you know it, and now you can walk the last stretch to the green not as the lonely keeper who stands apart but as what you always were, one of the bright beloved things, going home with the others to the finale. We move toward the last stop. The light is honey. I am tired in the good way, the way you are tired after a day that was entirely worth it. One more stop. The whole island has been climbing toward it since the Battery, and so, I understand now, looking at my kept face in the gold water, have I.

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14. The Whole Island Sings

HARLEM & THE GREAT LAWN

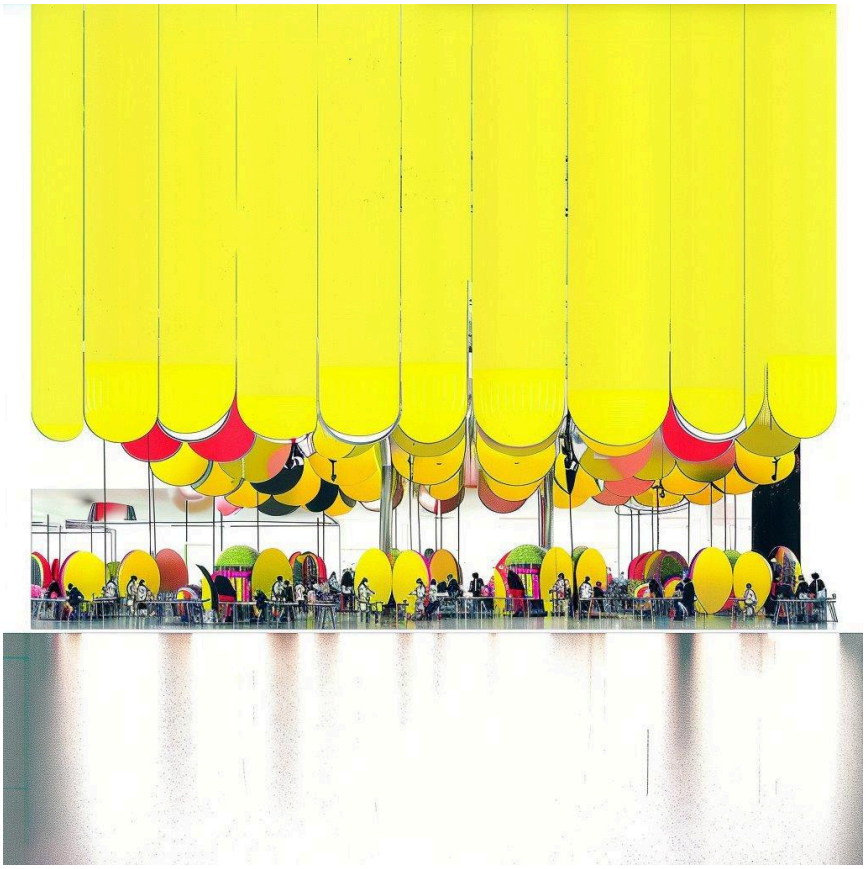

Plate 14

The last stop is the green itself — the great open lawn at the top of the park, with Harlem bright beyond it, the northern neighborhoods glowing in the last of the gold — and here the curtain does the thing it has been traveling all day to do, the thing the whole long walk from the harbor was only ever practice for. It does not stop and lift its hem at one more scene and then prepare to move on. There is no moving on from here; this is the top of the island; this is where the track ends and the green begins. So the curtain does not lift its hem. It opens. Completely. All its panels at once, the entire vast yellow length of it that has hung in single stops all day — the Battery's near-full drop, the canyon's high lift, the Village's sagging arches, the loud square's lowering, the giant letters, the two great round forms — all of it, every panel, flung wide open at the same moment over the whole green lawn, and every scene from the entire journey arrives at once.

They are all here. I want to name them, because they came all this way and they deserve their names spoken at the finale. The tall bowing ones from Wall Street, still bent, leaning now not in shame but in greeting. The cast-iron children from Tribeca, rolling and spinning

and showing off, the small watermelon-red one among them no longer standing near but fully playing. The loose illegible doodles from SoHo, larger than ever, every one flourished and finished and unafraid. The singing arches from the Village, the framed song riding with them. The chiming square from Union Square, its bicycles looping, its grief turned wholly to keel. The sailing wedge from Flatiron, going joyfully nowhere, carrying its whole crew. The red-hearted square from Herald, its caution-stripes pointing now at all the places the life is densest. The quieted, deepened Times Square, loud again but with the pilot light of quiet burning steady inside the roar. The lanterns from Bryant Park, the whole bouquet of small warm suns. The blooming, flowing, never-emptied flower wall from Grand Central. The hundred small round holders from Central Park South, who have set down their part of the hem at last — because here the curtain holds itself open, here no one has to hold it, here it is finally easy for everyone all at once. The whole island. Every wakened building, every bright small member of the cast, the mirror-pool's whole kept memory of the day risen up and gathered — all of them, on the one green lawn, under the one wide-open yellow. And they are singing.

Not one song. I want to be exact about this, because it is the heart of the finale and the heart of the whole book and very nearly the heart of everything I have learned in all my mornings as a keeper. It would be easy, and wrong, to say that at the finale the whole island joins in one great song together. They do not. They never could; they are far too different; the tall ones' deep slow bow-song could never be the same song as the doodles' fast scribbling cheer, and the quieted square's whispered pilot-light hum could never be the bicycles' bright chime, and the flower wall's hundred-million-footstep murmur could never be the cast-iron children's thrown-open-window clatter. Each one is singing its own scene. Its own discovered joy. Its own particular thing that it learned, this day, under the yellow — the bow and the play and the loosed line and the framed song and the chime and the joyful deck and the revealed red heart and the brave whisper and the lantern and the flowing bloom and the shared holding and the kept reflection — all of it, all at once, all together, every voice singing its own different song.

And it does not clash.

That is the miracle. That is the whole miracle, the one the entire route has been building toward since the silver morning at the Battery. A hundred different songs, every one of them different, sung all at once over a single green lawn — and it does not clash, it does not become noise, it does not become the grey wall of sound the Village taught us the city usually makes. It becomes one song. One enormous song made entirely of different songs, not one of them surrendered, not one of them flattened to match the others, every single voice singing its own true different thing — and the whole is somehow, impossibly, beautifully, a single piece of music. Because the curtain has spent the entire day teaching the island the one thing the Village first told me under its middle arch: the sounds only clash

when no one has framed them. And now the widest frame of all is open. The whole yellow length of the curtain, flung wide over the entire green, is one vast frame around every voice on the island at once — and inside a frame that wide, that generous, that complete, nothing clashes, because clashing was never about the sounds being different. The sounds were always different. Clashing was only ever about the sounds being unframed, unheld, unwitnessed, going to waste for lack of an edge of attention around them. Frame them all at once, hold them all together, witness every different voice as part of one deliberate whole — and the difference stops being discord and becomes, all at once, harmony. The same difference. The same voices. Only now they are framed, and so now they are music, and that is the only thing that ever had to change.

"Was this always possible," asks the green lawn, who is new to all of this, who has only ever been grass, who has spent its whole flat green life being walked on and lain on and played on and has never once, until this evening, been asked to be the stage for the whole island's single song. Its voice is the softest on the island, a green whisper, the sound of a great field of grass leaning all one way in an evening wind. "All of it? The whole island, singing together without clashing, every different voice one music? Was that always possible, this whole time, or did the curtain make it possible today?"

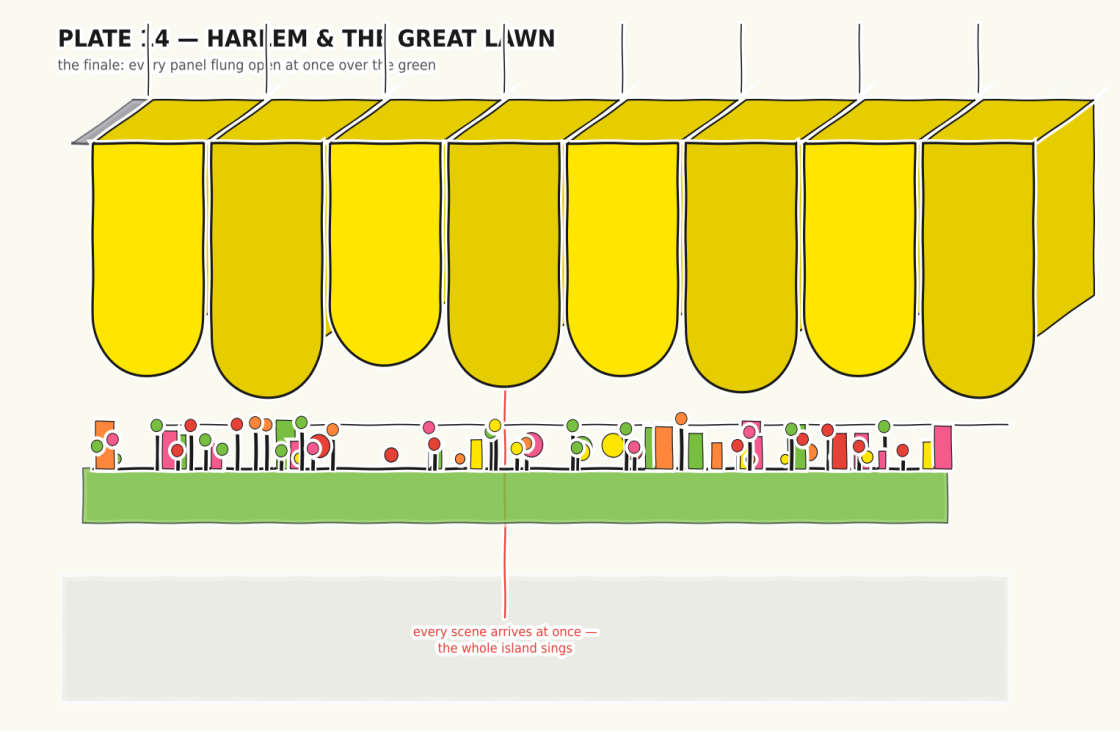
PLATE 4 — HARLEM & THE GREAT LAWN
the finale: every panel flung open at once over the green
every scene arrives at once —
the whole island sings

Elevation oblique — the curtain's configuration at Harlem & the Great Lawn

"Always," I tell the green lawn, and I am certain of it now, more certain than I have been of anything, because I have walked the whole length of the proof. "It was always possible. The curtain did not make it possible. The curtain only made it happen. The difference

between those two things is the difference the whole day has been about. Every voice you hear was always able to sing its own true song. Every building was always able to bow or bloom or whisper or play. The joy was always already here, scattered across the whole island, in every neighborhood, going to waste for lack of a frame. The curtain added nothing. It only framed what was already true, stop by stop, all the way up, and then opened the widest frame of all over all of it at once, here, on you, on the green at the top of the island — and what was always possible finally, for one gold evening, actually happened."

"Then it can happen again," says the green lawn, working it out the way the green figure in the Village worked it out, the way the doodle's loops sped up. "If the curtain only frames what was already true — then the truth is still here tomorrow, when the curtain has gone back down to the harbor. The voices are still here. The joy is still here. It is only the frame that leaves. So anyone who learned, today, to frame it — anyone who learned to hold an edge of attention around the scattered joy and hear it as the song it always was — they could make it happen again. Without the curtain. Couldn't they?"

"That," I say, and my whole heart is in it, "is the only thing the curtain has ever been trying to teach. Yes. Anyone who learned, today, can make it happen again. The curtain is not the joy. The curtain is the teacher of the framing. And a teacher's whole hope is to become unnecessary — to teach the thing so well that the student can do it alone, or rather, never alone, but without the teacher, holding their own part, standing close to the others. Every building we woke today, every member of the cast, every real person who looked up in the canyon or stood in the lantern-light or felt the bloom ride out of Grand Central on their hurrying shoulders — every one of them learned, a little, to frame the joy. And a few of them learned it deeply. And a few is enough. A few, in each neighborhood, keep the song going long after the yellow has moved on. That is the whole plan. That was always the whole plan. The curtain walks the island teaching it to sing, so that one day the island can sing without the curtain."

I stand at the edge of the great green lawn with my broom and my ring of keys, and I watch the whole island sing — every scene of the whole day returned and singing its own different song into the one wide-open frame — and the mirror-pool below the lawn holds all of it, the entire day, doubled and gold and kept, my own small face among the cast, in the play, kept like everything else. And I think about tomorrow. Because there is a tomorrow; there is always a tomorrow; that is not the sad part, though it could be mistaken for the sad part. Tomorrow I will walk back down the whole length of the island to the Battery, to the green at the bottom where the curtain sleeps, and I will knock three times on the lowest panel, and I will say good morning, and I will wait the breath of wondering, and the curtain will wake, and we will do it all again. The same. And completely different. Because the play has no ending. It cannot have an ending. An ending is for things that are made of time, like a single performance, and the play is not a single performance; the play is the island being

alive; and the island does not end, it only goes around again, the same and different, the curtain walking up and sleeping down and walking up again, teaching the song over and over to new ears, keeping it alive in the few who learn it deeply, world without ending.

And that is not a sadness. I need you to hear this, here at the end, in the gold light on the green lawn with the whole island singing. The no-ending is not a sadness. It is the best news there has ever been. It means the grey mornings will keep coming — yes, they will, I will not lie to you, the grey mornings always keep coming, for the island and for the keeper and for you — and it means that every single one of them, without exception, forever, there will be a curtain at the bottom of the island ready to be woken, and a keeper to wake it, and a whole route of neighborhoods waiting to be taught again that their scattered joy was always a song. The grey mornings keep coming and so does the yellow. That is the deal. That is the whole deal, and it is a good deal, the best deal, and I would not trade it for a world with no grey mornings, because a world with no grey mornings would be a world with no need for yellow, and I have given my whole small life to the yellow and I do not regret one morning of it.

So here is the last thing, and I am saying it to you now, directly, the way the flower wall spoke directly to me — putting down the story for one moment to speak past it, to the actual you, holding this actual yellow book. I know about your grey morning. Not the specific grey of it; I do not know your particular weather; but I know that you have them, because everyone does, because the grey mornings keep coming for everyone, that is simply the condition of the thing. And I know that you are holding this yellow book against one of them right now, or will be soon, or were recently — holding something yellow up between yourself and the grey, and choosing, the way I taught the whole island to choose, the way the very first square of lemon-colored paper taught me to choose, to look through the warm thing at the world. You are doing it right now. That is what reading this is. You are holding up the yellow. And the grey morning behind it has not changed at all — I cannot change your grey morning, no book can, the curtain itself could not change a single grey morning, it never once tried to — but the looking has changed, because you put something yellow between yourself and the grey and chose to look through it, and the looking was always the part that could change, the only part, the whole part. So look. The curtain is already moving back down toward the harbor to sleep, so that it can wake tomorrow and climb again. Up you get. There is a whole island in you waiting to be taught that its scattered joy was always a song, and you do not need a mile of yellow cloth to teach it, you only need to hold an edge of attention around the joy you already have and hear it, finally, as the music it has been the whole time. Mind the cables. Here is the first stop, again, for the first time. Good morning. Where today? Up. All the way up. The whole island, the long way, the way that takes all day.

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Afterword

People ask me whether the curtain is real, and I always say yes, and they always think I am being whimsical, and I am not.

The curtain is as real as choosing to look through yellow on a grey morning, which is to say: it is exactly as real as you decide to make it, and that turns out to be very real indeed. I cannot hang an actual mile of yellow over Manhattan. But I can build it so completely — model every panel, render every cable, give every building its bow and its blush and its quiet — that when you have walked the whole length of it with me, something in you has hung it for real, in the only place it was ever meant to hang, which is in the way you walk out your own front door tomorrow.

That is the gift I am trying to hand you, the way someone once handed it to me from a studio wall. Not a story about a happy city. The actual capacity to find the city you are already in to be alive, and bowing, and blushing, and holding up something enormous on a hundred small willing shoulders, and singing its own scene under the widest frame you are willing to open over it. The buildings really do speak to one another. You have simply been too hurried, until now, to frame the conversation and hear it as the song it is.

Everyone in this book is genderqueer and non-binary because everyone in this book is permitted to be exactly and abundantly themselves, and I wanted a world where that permission was so total it had soaked into the architecture, into the curtain, into the light. I am that world's author and one of its citizens both. I made the pictures with my own hands and my own software and no machine dreaming in my place, and I made the words alongside a patient artificial co-author, and I am the creator of the whole context, and I am telling you all of this plainly because radical joy has nothing to hide, least of all how it was made.

Walk up the island. Take all day. Mind the cables. And when you reach the green at the top and the whole place opens into song, do me one kindness: look down into the mirror-pool, and find your own small face among the cast, kept and doubled and gold — because you were never only reading this. You were in it the whole time. You were always part of the play.

I built the images the slow way, and I want to describe the slowness, because the slowness is part of what I am trying to give you. Each plate began as a three-dimensional model, built by hand in Rhino, panel by panel and figure by figure — the curtain modeled as an actual hanging thing with actual weight, so that its hem would fall the way real heavy cloth falls; the cast placed one at a time; the mirror-pool given a real reflective surface so that the doubling in the water is a true optical doubling and not a painted trick. Then I lit each scene and rendered it, which is its own slow craft, waiting while the light is calculated

bounce by bounce. No part of this was generated for me by a machine dreaming on my behalf. I say this not to claim virtue but to claim the work, because the work is the love, and I would not want you to mistake a year of deliberate making for a moment of automatic conjuring. The curtain hangs the way it hangs because I hung it. The light is warm because I warmed it. When you look through the yellow, you are looking through a yellow that someone chose, on purpose, for you.

The words, as I said at the beginning, were made differently — written in conversation with an artificial intelligence, a patient co-author who never tired and never took the pen entirely — and I have been asked whether that undercuts the honesty of a book so concerned with the handmade. I have decided it does not, provided I am plain about it, which I am being. The voice is mine. The city is mine. The cast, the keeper, the insistence on joy, the central claim that the joy was always already there and only wanted framing — all mine, argued for and shaped over many drafts. What I shared was the labor of sentences, and I think there is no shame in sharing the labor of sentences with a patient collaborator, so long as you do not pretend you wrote alone when you did not. I am the author. I am the creator of the context. The intelligence helped me find the words for what was already, unmistakably, mine to say. That is the honest account, and honesty, in a book about lifting your hem to show the warm red underneath, seemed the only possible way to write the part about how it was made.

One last thing, and then I will let you go up the island. People sometimes ask me whether I worry that a book this committed to joy is naive — whether, in a world with as much grey in it as ours has, all this yellow is a kind of looking-away, a refusal to see the hard things clearly. I have thought about this more than about any other criticism, because it is the one I would level myself if I were not careful, and here is my answer. The book does not look away from the grey. The keeper says it plainly, again and again, all the way up the island and especially at the end: the grey mornings keep coming. They keep coming for the island and for the keeper and for you. The book never once pretends otherwise. What the book refuses is not the grey but the conclusion that the grey is the only thing worth seeing clearly. You can see the grey morning with perfect clarity and still choose to hold something yellow up between yourself and it, and look through the yellow, and the looking-through is not a denial of the grey — the grey is right there, unchanged, behind the yellow — it is only a decision about what to do with a morning you did not choose and cannot change. That is not naivety. Naivety is not knowing about the grey. This is knowing about the grey, all of it, and choosing the yellow anyway, on purpose, every single morning, forever. I think that choice is the least naive thing a person can do. I think it might be the bravest. I have given my book to teaching it, and I give the book, now, to you.

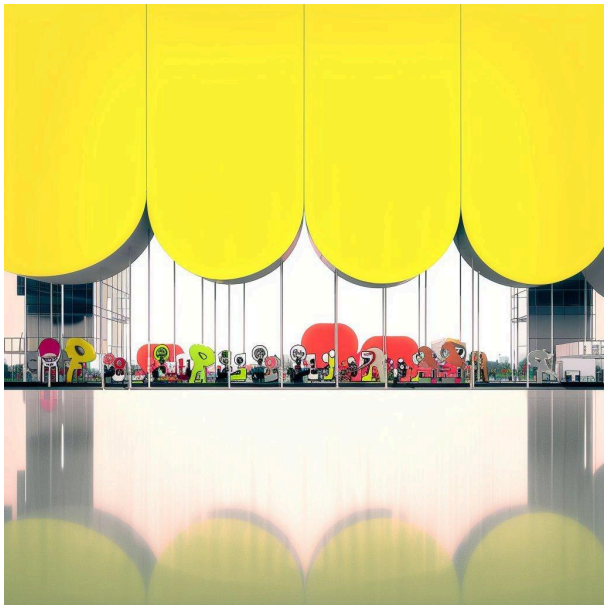
— Surjan

Catalogue of Plates

Fourteen plates, presented in the order of the curtain's ascent up Manhattan, south to north. Each was conceived, modeled in three dimensions, and rendered by the author; each is accompanied by its own elevation-oblique diagram, drawn to show how the curtain hangs at that particular stop. Media: digital 3D model (Rhino), rendered; 1:1 square format.

Plate 1. The Curtain Wakes

The Battery



The apparatus at rest in the harbor green, hem lifted a hand's width to reveal the full cast in a single bright row. Note the colossal scalloped panels at near-full drop and the mirror-pool already gathering the morning.

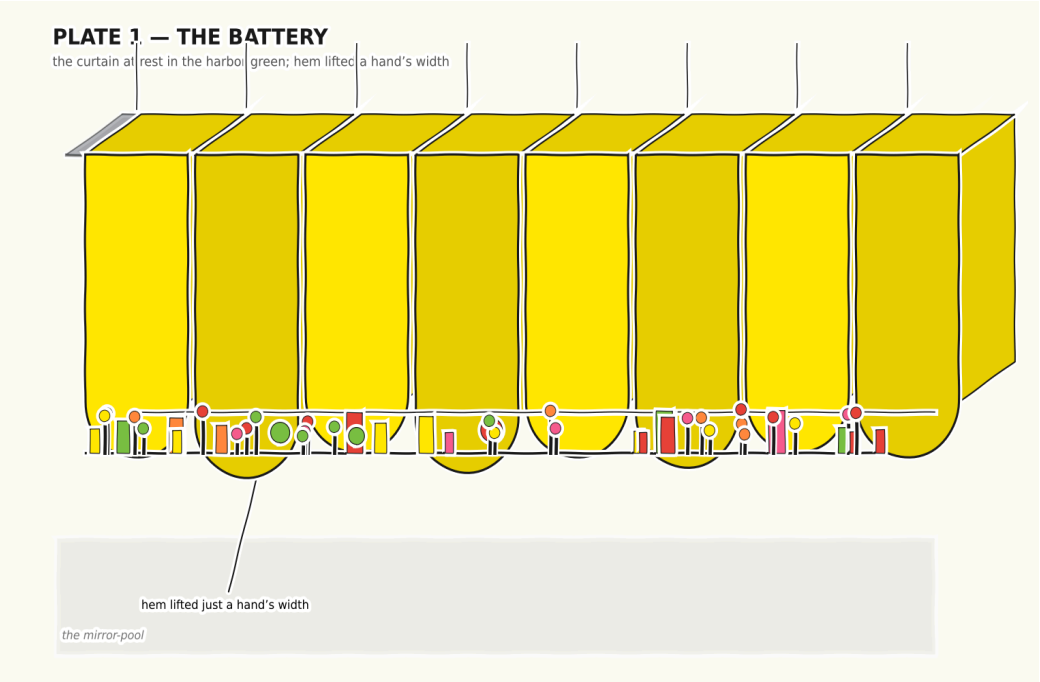
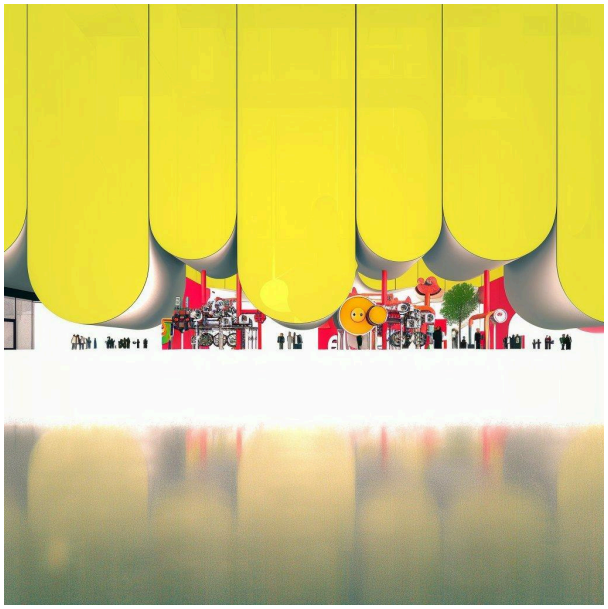


PLATE 1 — THE BATTERY
the curtain at rest in the harbor green; hem lifted a hand's width
hem lifted just a hand's width
the mirror-pool

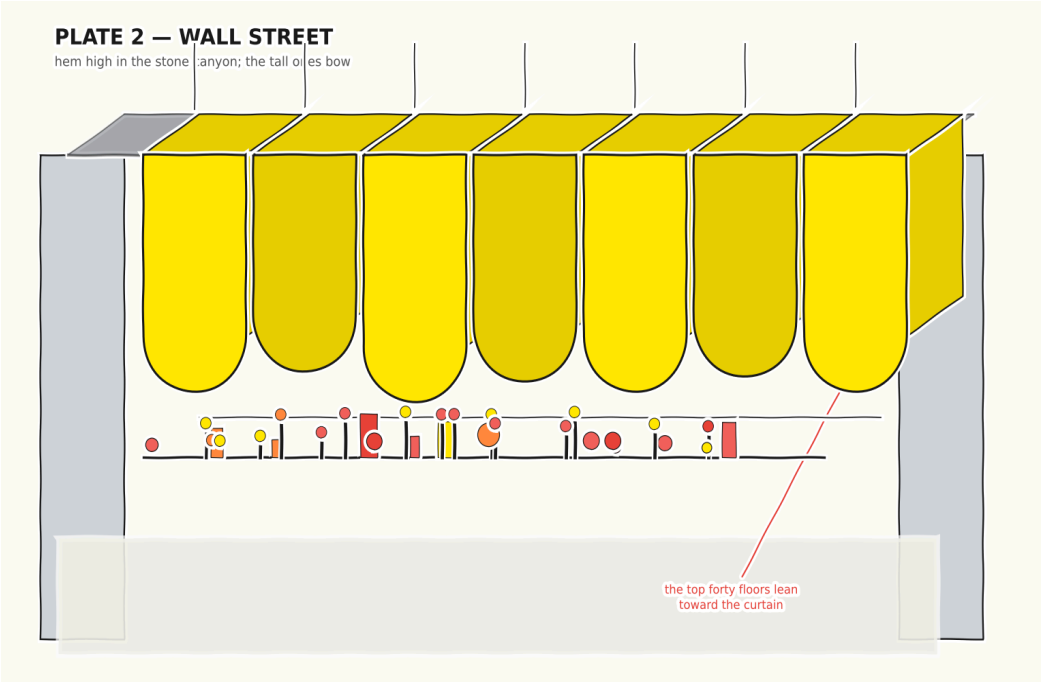
Elevation oblique, Plate 1

Plate 2. The Tall Ones Bow

Wall Street / Financial District



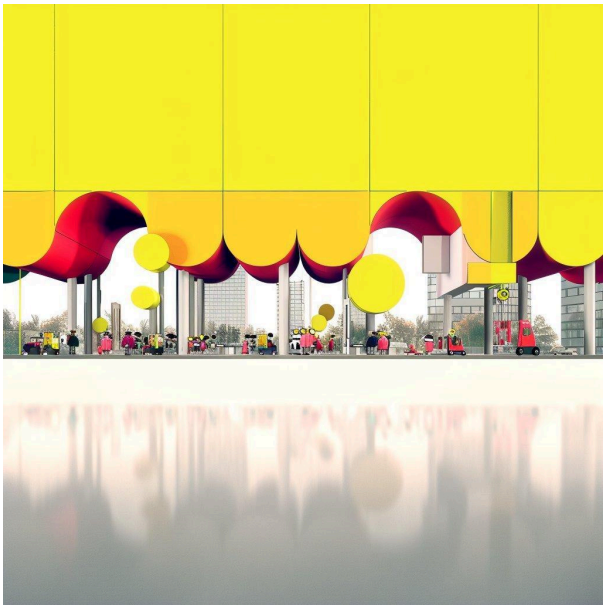
The curtain in the stone canyon, hem high over the machines and dark-coated crowds. A single orange disc rolls at center — the coin that decided to be a sun.



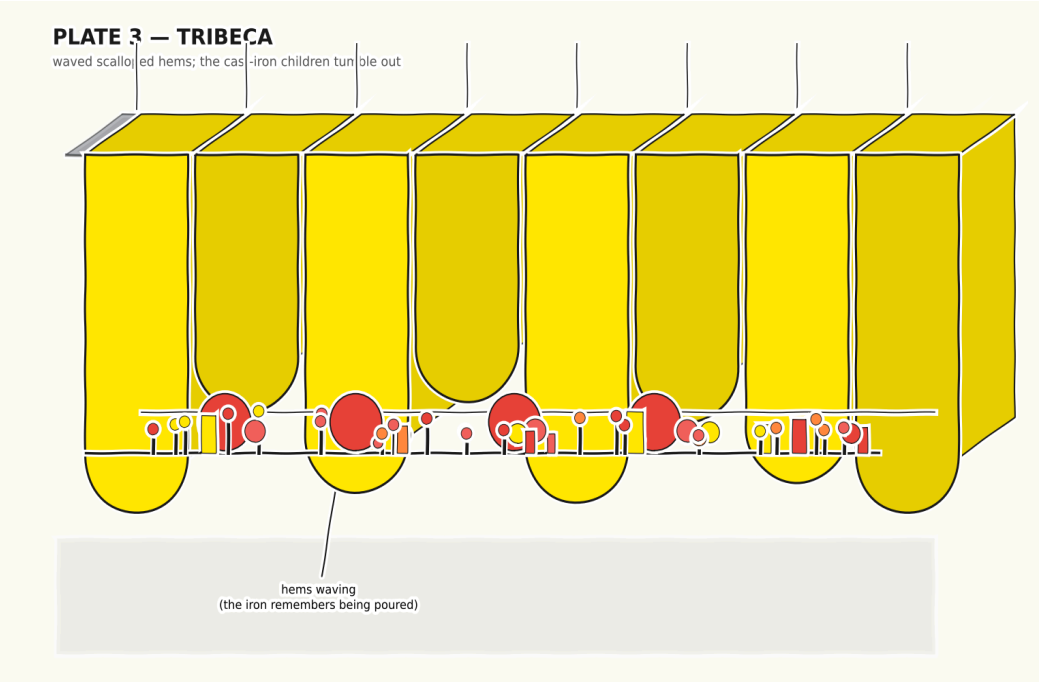
Elevation oblique, Plate 2

Plate 3. The Cast-Iron Children

Tribeca



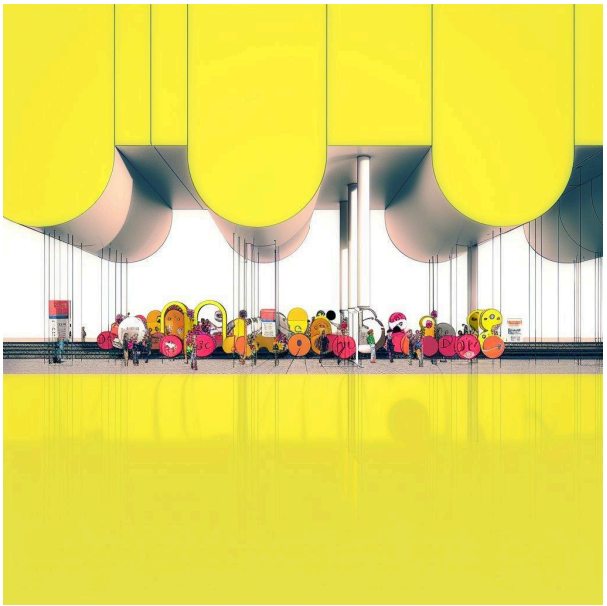
Cherry-red and butter-yellow forms tumble forward beneath waved panels; spinning discs and small carts. The architecture remembers being poured and longs to play.



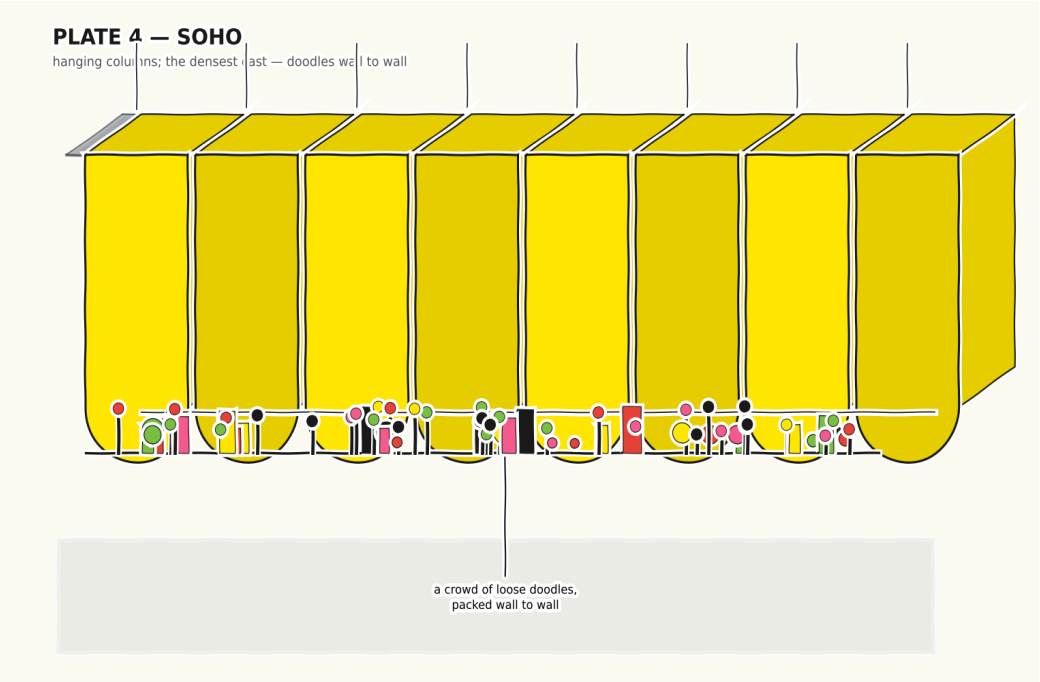
Elevation oblique, Plate 3

Plate 4. The Doodle That Got Loose

SoHo



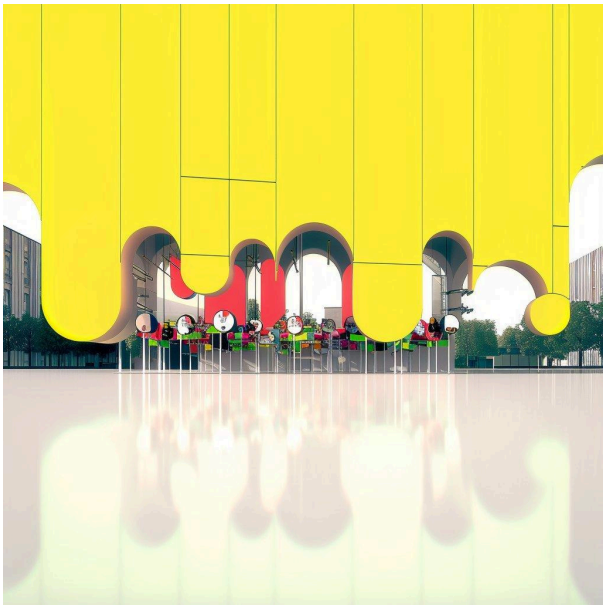
The densest cast in the cycle — a wall-to-wall crowd of looping ink-and-color creatures under hanging columns. The neighborhood writing itself larger.



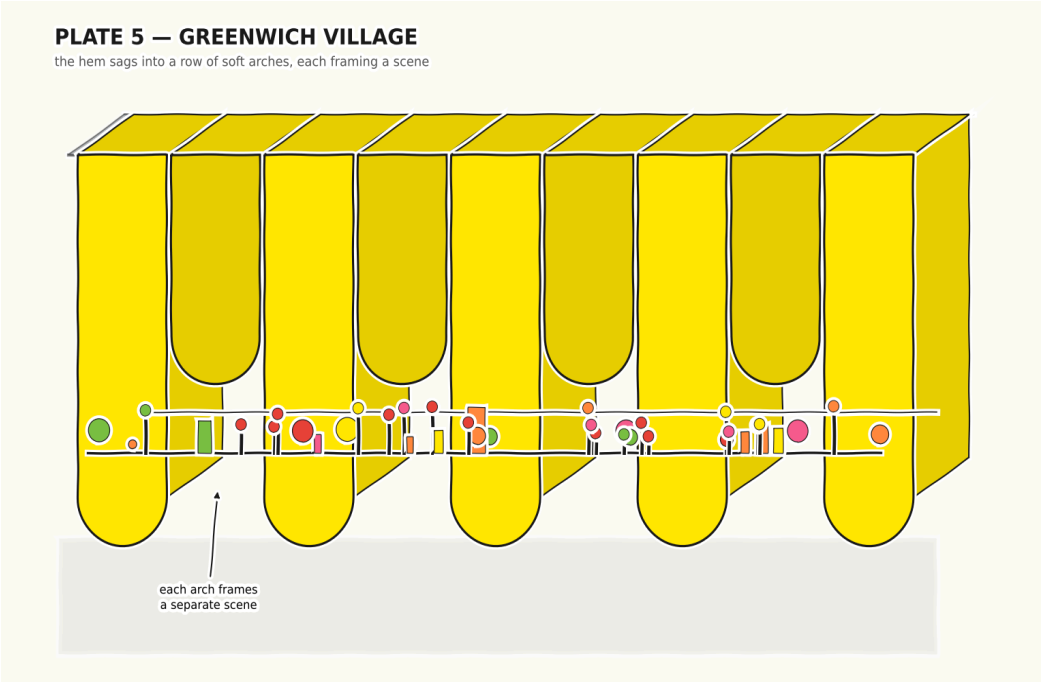
Elevation oblique, Plate 4

Plate 5. The Arches Learn to Sing

Greenwich Village



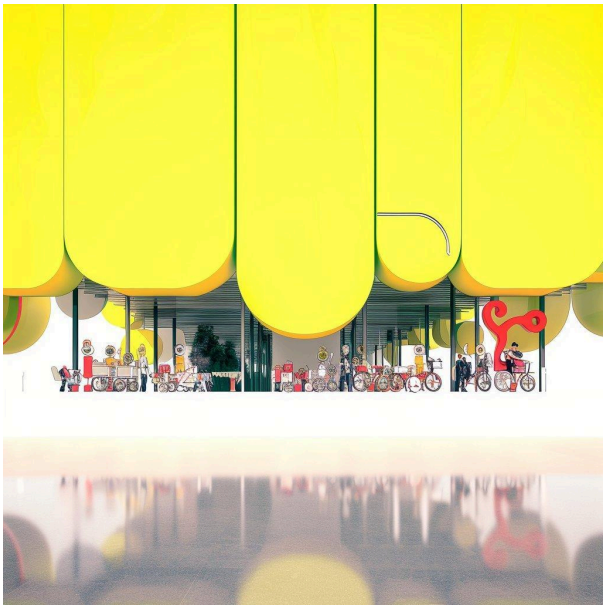
The hem sags into a row of soft scalloped arches, each framing a separate scene. Green and red clusters; the framed song of a low, kind, crooked quarter.



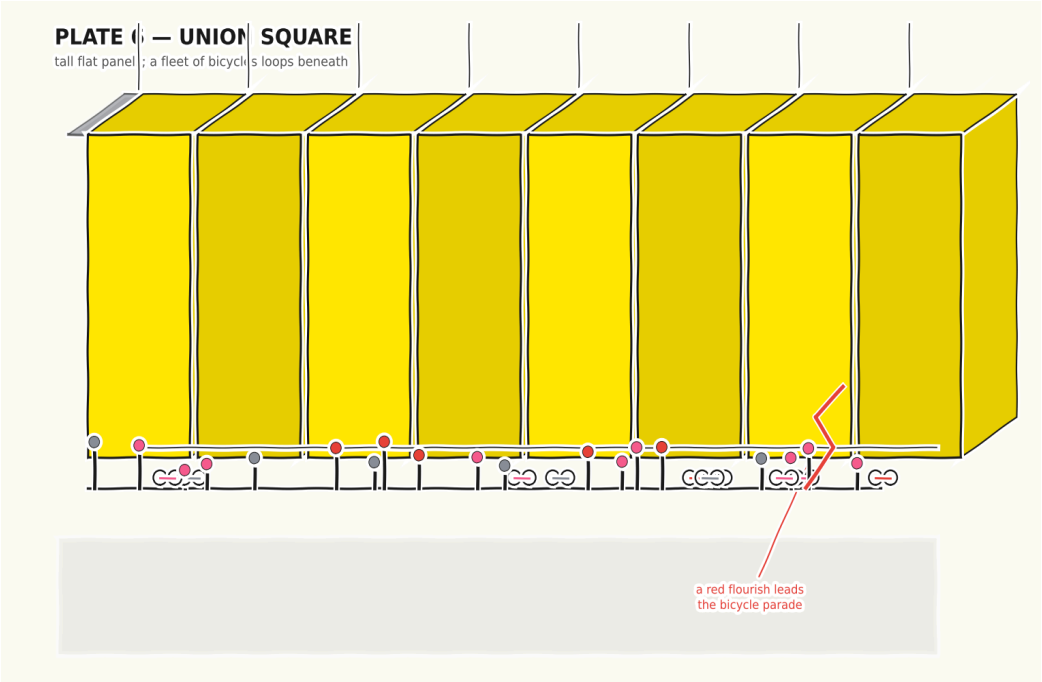
Elevation oblique, Plate 5

Plate 6. The Square That Remembered

Union Square



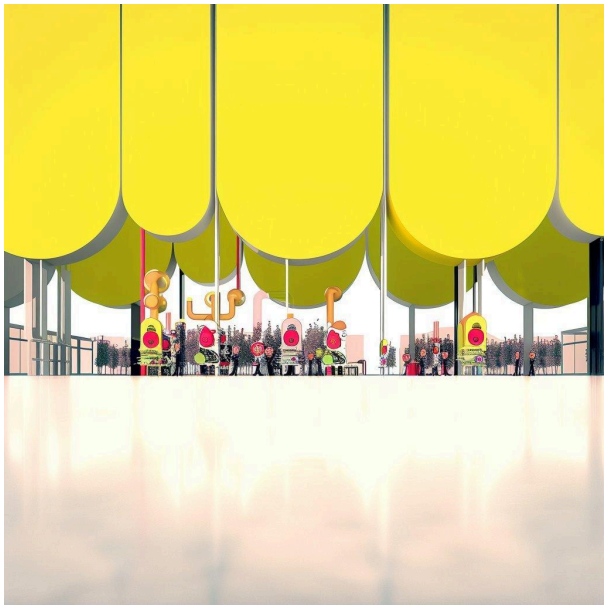
A red-framed fleet of bicycles loops beneath the yellow, led by a curling red flourish. Two centuries of gathering revealed as practice for moving freely together.



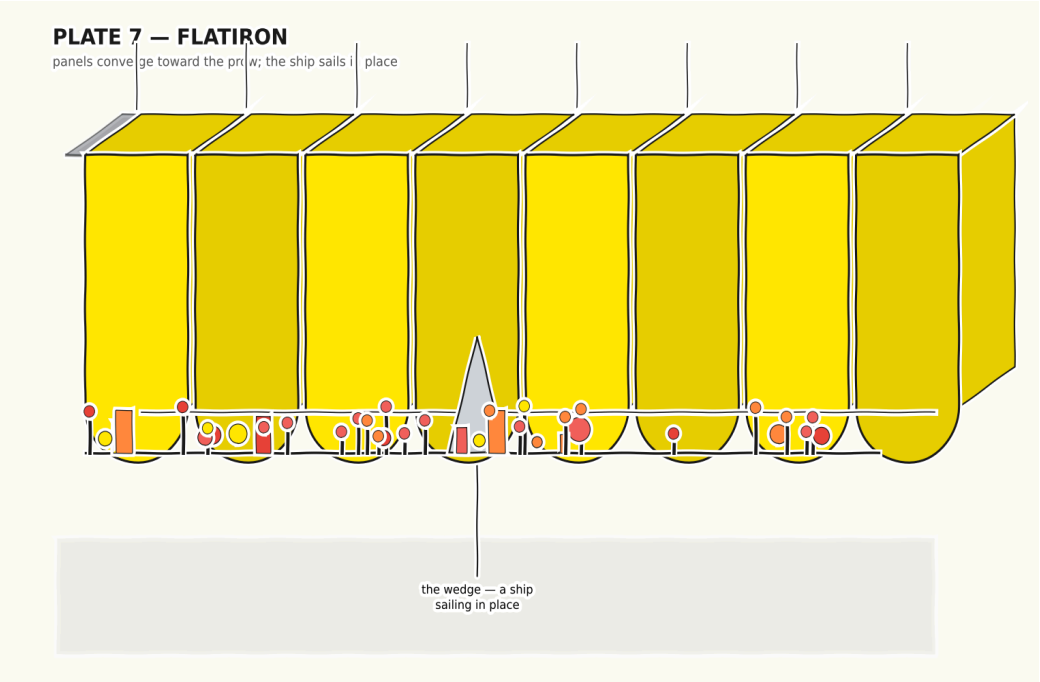
Elevation oblique, Plate 6

Plate 7. The Iron at the Crossroads

Flatiron / Madison Square



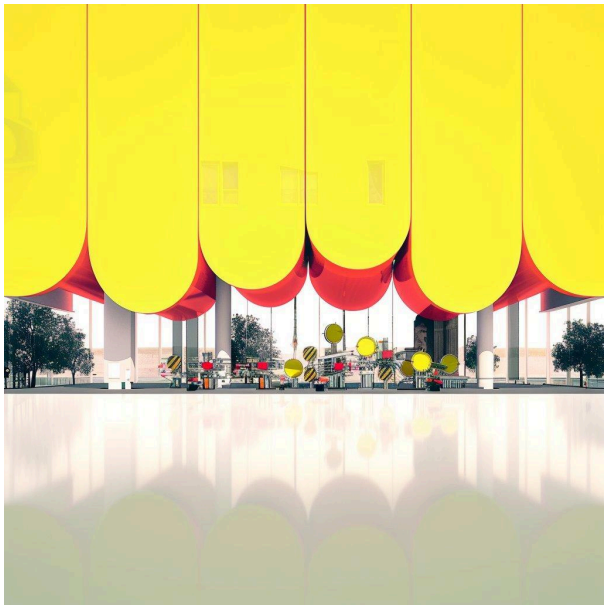
Brass-curl machines and round-faced figures crowd the triangular plaza at the prow. The ship that learns to sail in place, carrying everyone.



Elevation oblique, Plate 7

Plate 8. The Red Beneath the Yellow

Herald Square



The pivotal plate: the curtain lifts high enough to show its coral-red underside. Caution-striped discs reframed — warning colors as an invitation to attention. The curtain's heart, briefly public.

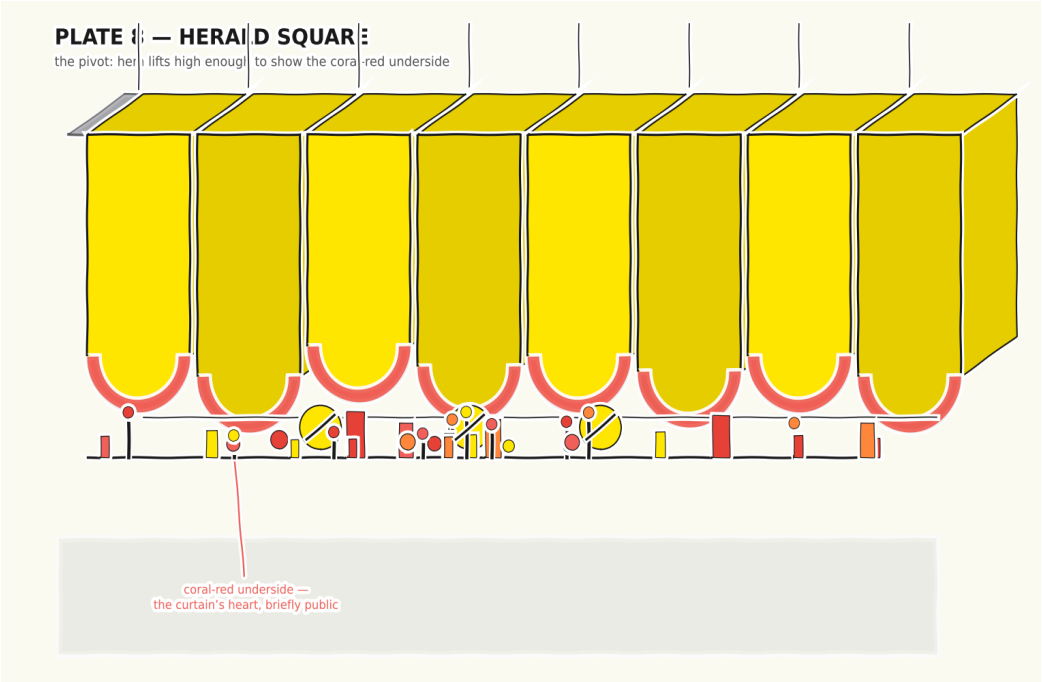
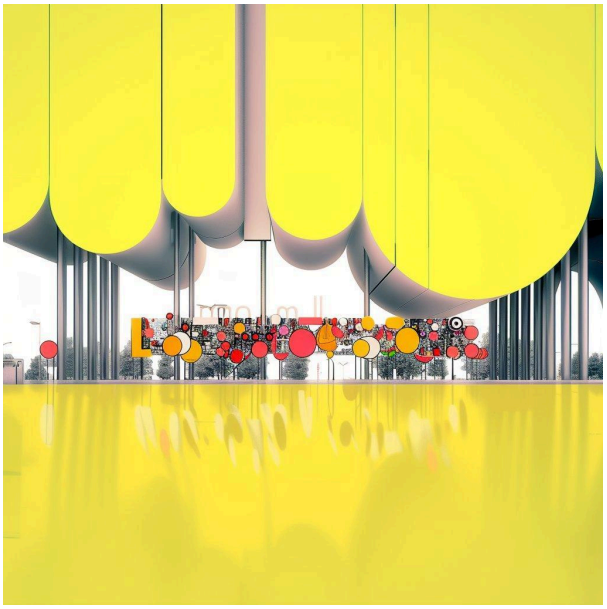


PLATE 8 — HERALD SQUARE
the pivot: her lifts high enough to show the coral-red underside
coral-red underside —
the curtain's heart, briefly public

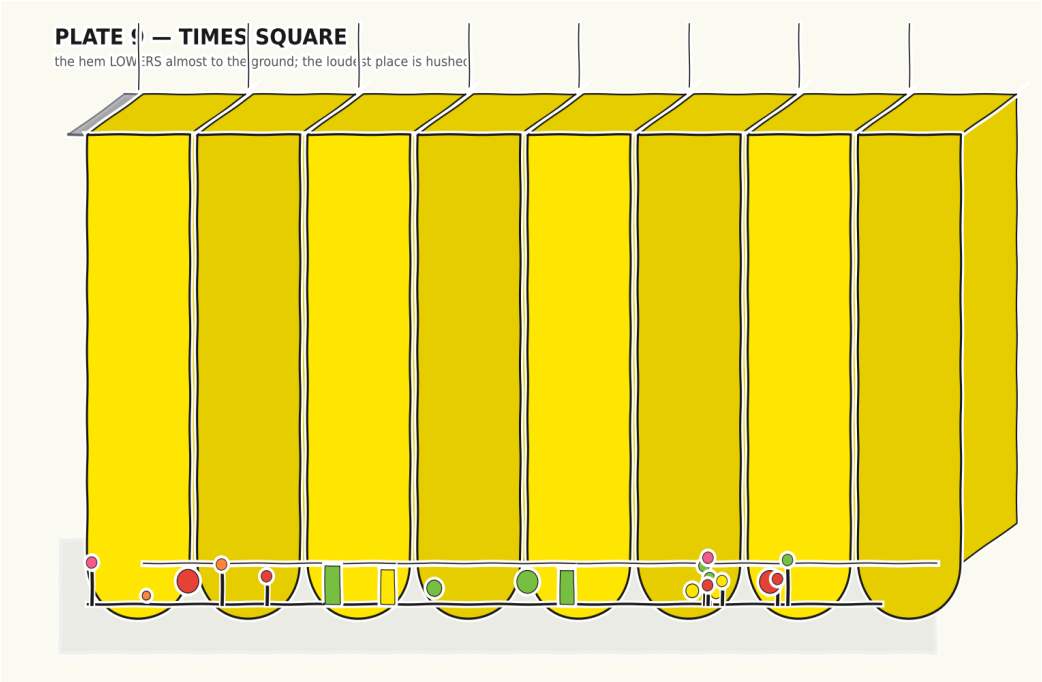
Elevation oblique, Plate 8

Plate 9. The Square That Was Already a Stage

Times Square



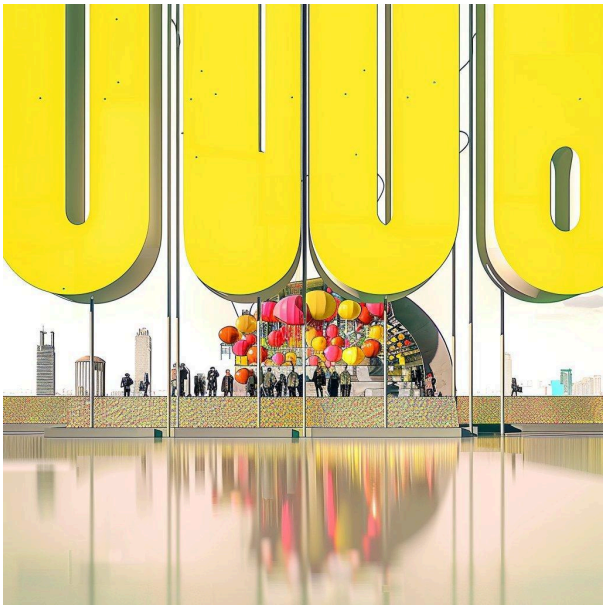
The hem lowers nearly to the ground, hushing the loudest place in the world. Scattered, unhurried figures in gentled yellow light. The whisper that is the truest thing it ever said.



Elevation oblique, Plate 9

Plate 10. The Garden Behind the Letters

Bryant Park / 42nd St



Four vast yellow letter-columns frame a bouquet of glowing paper lanterns — pink, orange, gold — above the gathered green. The library city taking its light down off the shelf.

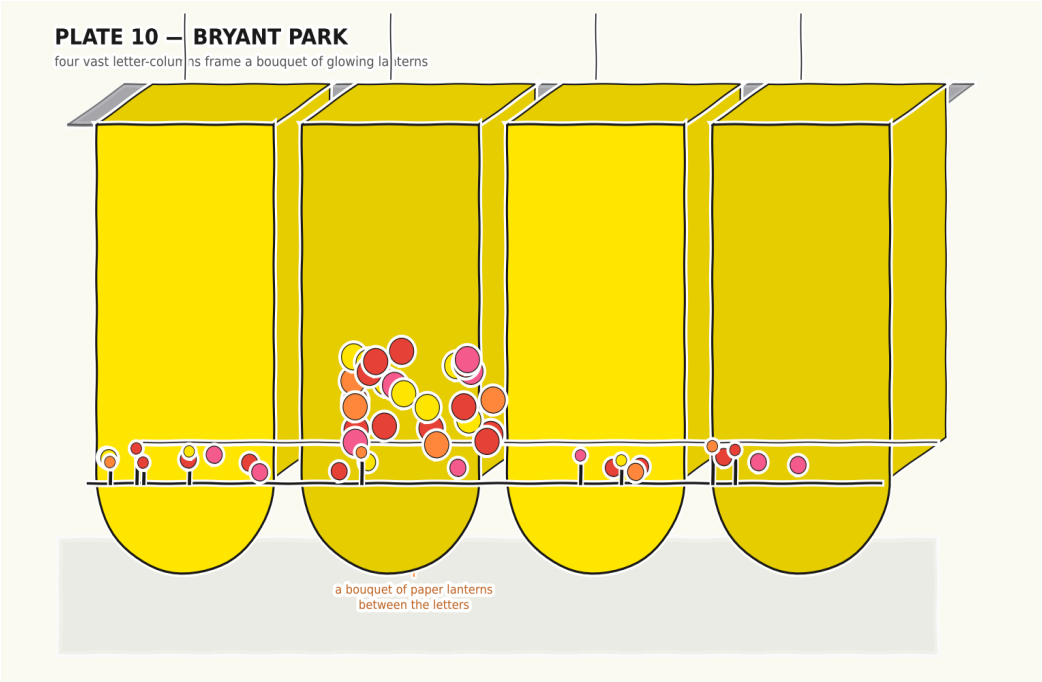
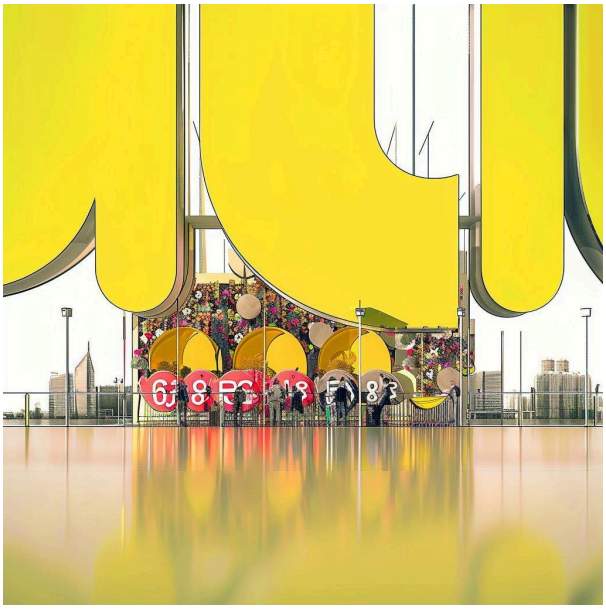


PLATE 10 — BRYANT PARK
four vast letter-columns frame a bouquet of glowing lanterns
a bouquet of paper lanterns
between the letters

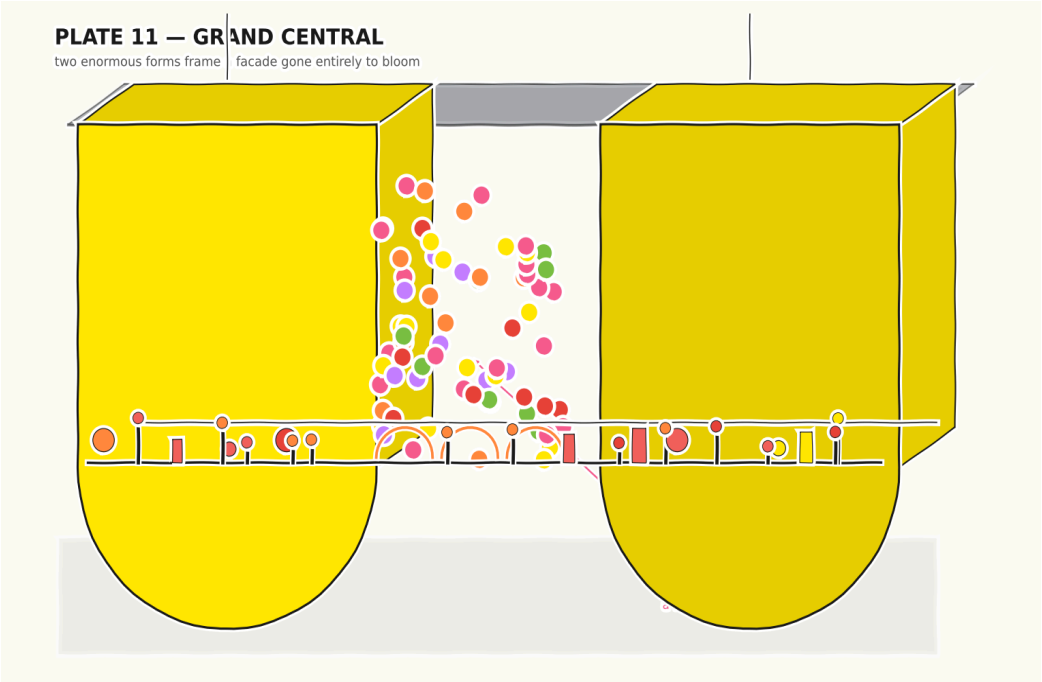
Elevation oblique, Plate 10

Plate 11. The Flower Wall Speaks

Grand Central / Midtown East



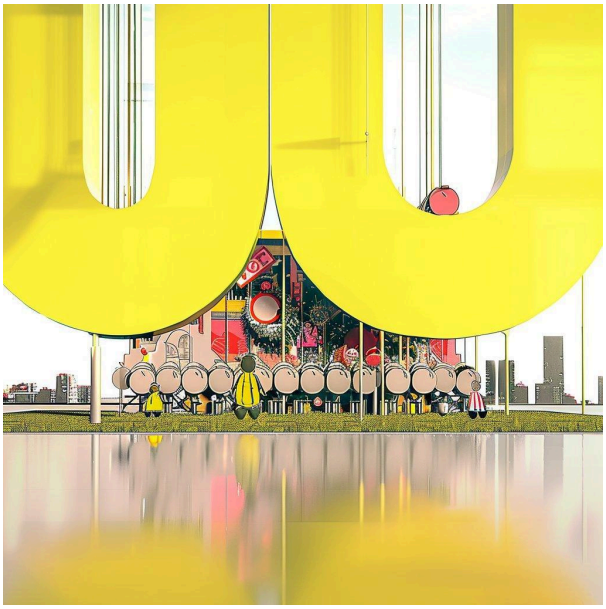
Two enormous forms frame a full facade gone to bloom; golden arches and near-legible red letters below. The generous station that blooms entirely for those who are leaving.



Elevation oblique, Plate 11

Plate 12. The Round Ones Hold the Hem Up

Central Park South



The two largest forms in the apparatus, hems nearly grounded, held aloft by a long line of small identical round figures. No one holds it alone. The green and the city finally see each other.

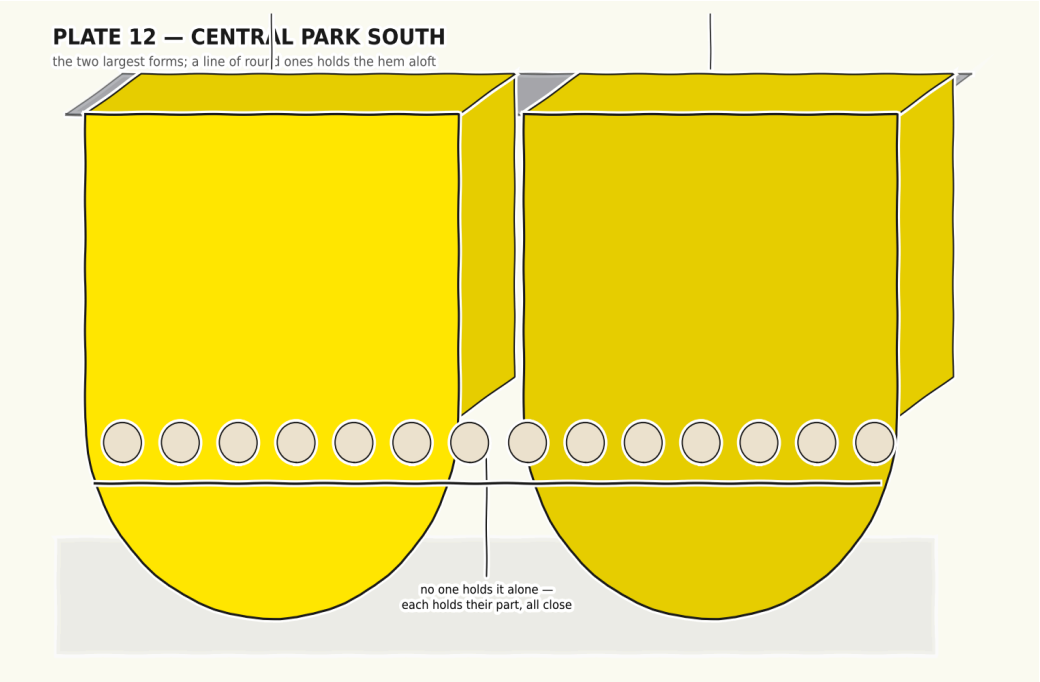
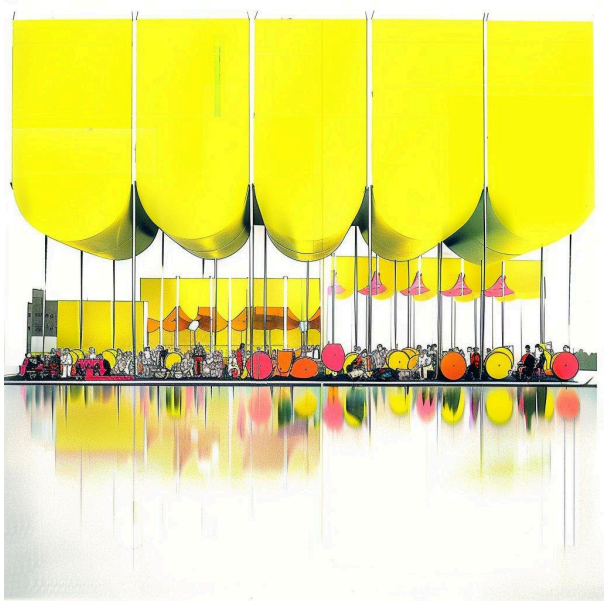


PLATE 12 — CENTRAL PARK SOUTH
the two largest forms; a line of round ones holds the hem aloft
no one holds it alone —
each holds their part, all close

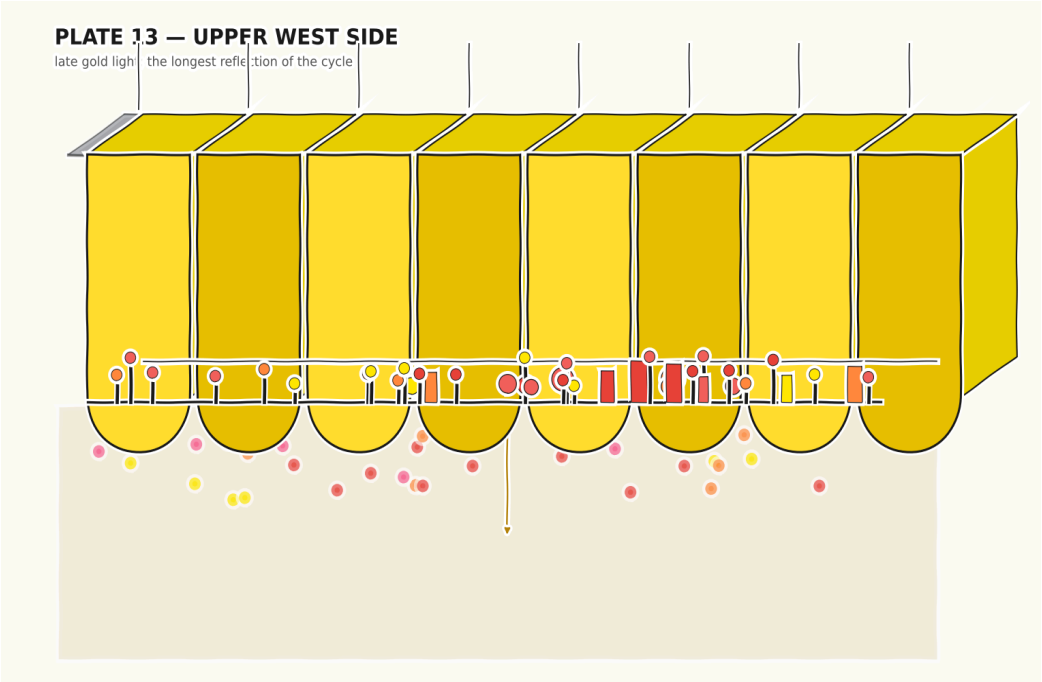
Elevation oblique, Plate 12

Plate 13. The Reflection Learns Its Name

The Upper West Side



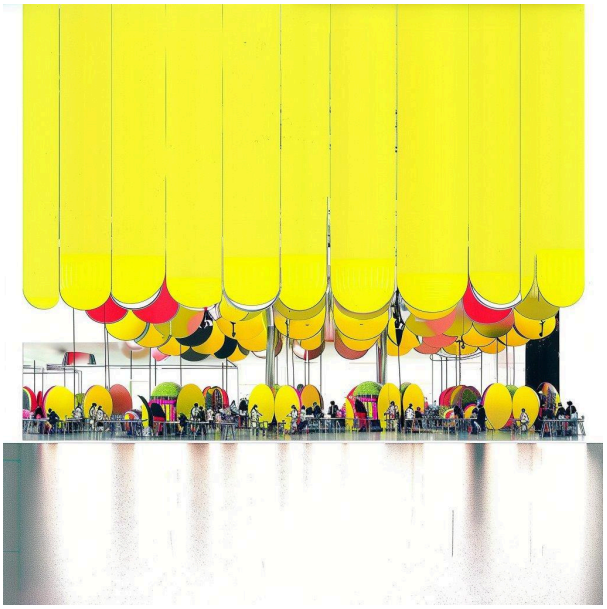
The longest reflection of the cycle in low gold light — the full cast doubled in the mirror-pool. The reflection revealed not as copy but as the city's lasting memory of the day.



Elevation oblique, Plate 13

Plate 14. The Whole Island Sings

Harlem & the Great Lawn



The finale: every panel open at once over the great lawn, every wakened building and cast member gathered, each singing its own scene into one song made of many. The mirror-pool keeps it all, doubled and gold.

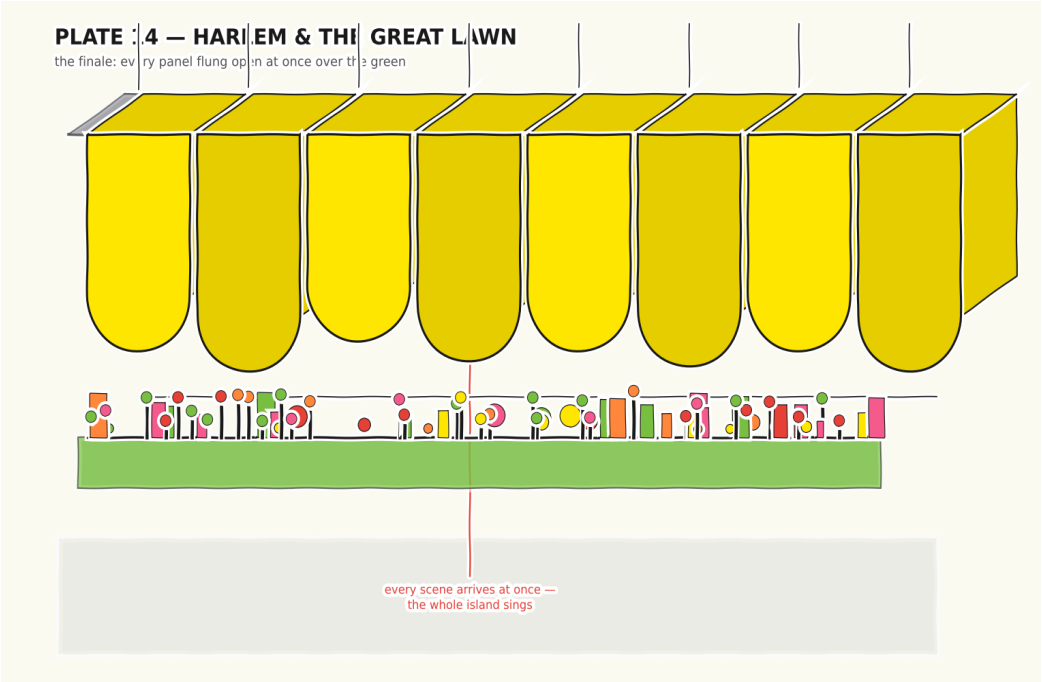
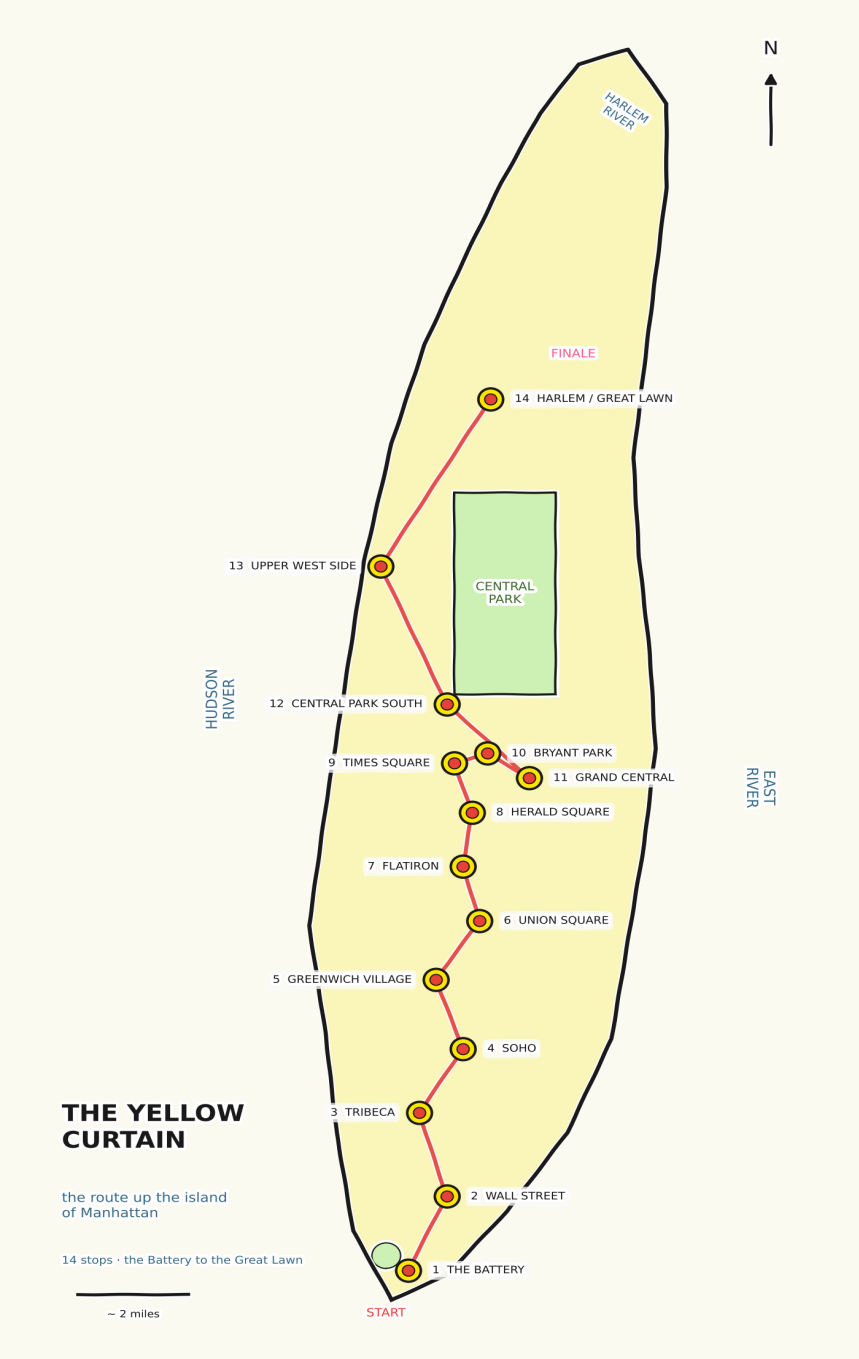


PLATE 14 — HARLEM & THE GREAT LAWN
the finale: every panel flung open at once over the green
every scene arrives at once —
the whole island sings

Elevation oblique, Plate 14

Map of the Island

The Yellow Curtain travels a single track up the spine of Manhattan, pausing at fourteen neighborhoods between the Battery at the island's southern tip and the Great Lawn near its northern end. The map shows the whole island — bounded by the Hudson River to the west, the East River to the east, and the Harlem River to the north — with the fourteen stops marked in their true order of ascent.



The route, south to north, the full length of the island.

Colophon & Credits

- All imagery in this book — every one of the fourteen plates — was conceived, modeled in three dimensions (Rhino 3D), and rendered by Surjan. No artificial intelligence was used to generate, alter, or assist any image in this work. The pictures are entirely Surjan's own.
- The writing was authored by Surjan with the assistance of artificial intelligence: Surjan conceived the story, the voice, the cast, and the meaning, and wrote it in collaboration with an AI that assisted with the labor of the prose. The words are Surjan's, AI-assisted; the images are Surjan's alone.
- The schematic map and the fourteen elevation-oblique diagrams are explanatory illustrations prepared for this edition.
- Surjan is the creator of the context.
- Every individual in this novella is genderqueer and non-binary, as is the author.

◇ ◆ ◇

Look down into the mirror-pool, and find your own face among the cast.

BOOK FIVE · THE LONG MORNING

THE BUOYANT SALONS

A Catalogue of Penthouses
That Learned to Float

eighty-one rooftops → the reef on the Hudson

"A vault keeps precious things apart
so that none can be lost.
A reef builds precious things together
so that none can be lost —
because you cannot remove one piece of a reef to sell it.
It has become the others.
It has become the place itself."

— Lustre, the colorless pearl

THE BUOYANT SALONS

A Catalogue of Penthouses That Learned to Float

Being a true and partial account of the inflatable Baroque-Rococo pavilions of the island of Manhattan, the priceless glass artifacts they shelter, and the morning they all went down to the river together.

by Surjan

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Being a true and partial account of the inflatable Baroque-Rococo pavilions of the island of Manhattan, the priceless glass artifacts they shelter, and the morning they all went down to the river together.

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for everyone who was told to make themselves smaller, and made themselves luminous instead

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FOREWORD

I should tell you at once that I am not a reliable narrator, and neither is anyone else in this book. The penthouses lie about their square footage. The glass artifacts exaggerate their own provenance. The river, when it speaks, speaks in the past and future tenses simultaneously, which is its right, being older than grammar.

My name is Surjan. I am the one holding the pen, though "holding" is generous; mostly I take dictation. I am genderqueer and non-binary, which in the vocabulary of this book means simply that I am fluent in the language these objects speak, the language of things that refuse the single name they were given at the foundry. When the curators of the world look at a Rococo cartouche and say *decorative*, I hear the cartouche answer back: *no — necessary*. When they say *excess*, I hear: *abundance*. When they say *too much*, I hear the only sentence any of us has ever wanted to say out loud, which is: *I am exactly as much as I am.*

This is a catalogue, of a kind. It catalogues a city you have walked through without seeing, because the most extravagant things in Manhattan have always been kept on the roofs, above the sightline, behind the scaffolding, under the shrink-wrap, in the penthouse — that word that means *the apartment at the top* and also, if you listen, *the place we put the things we are not ready to be seen wanting.*

For one year I had the privilege of being trusted by them. The pavilions let me up. The artifacts let me listen. And on the morning this book describes, they let me come to the water.

I have changed no names, because none of them were ashamed.

Read it in any order you like. Calvino taught me that a catalogue is a kind of city and you may enter a city by any gate. Cortázar taught me that the reader is a co-conspirator and may rearrange the furniture. I only ask that you read it in the daylight. This is a sunlit book. It was assembled almost entirely in the morning, which is the hour when things that floated all night come to rest, still glowing, on the surface of the water, and pretend they have been there the whole time.

A word on how this book was made, since I believe in saying plainly what was mine and what was helped. The imagery is entirely my own — every plate, every pavilion, every glass artifact, every drawing in these pages was made by my own hand and eye. The pictures came first; they are the true text, and the truest thing I have. The words you are reading were written with the assistance of an artificial intelligence, which I treated the way the scaffolding treated the pavilions — as a temporary structure that held the work while it found its shape, and was glad, in the end, to come down. I take responsibility for every sentence; I claim authorship of every image; and I tell you the arrangement openly, because a book about the refusal to hide what one is would be a poor thing if it began by hiding how it was made.

— S.

INTRODUCTION: THE RULES OF A FLOATING WORLD

Every world runs on rules, and a joyful one runs on generous rules, so let me set them down before we climb.

The first rule is that the pavilions are inflatable. This is not a metaphor, though it is also a metaphor. Atop certain buildings of Manhattan — never the ones you would guess — there are penthouses made of air held inside membrane: great quilted cushions of silvered fabric and gilded seam, swelling at dawn and settling at dusk, breathing. From the street you cannot see them. The scaffolding hides them. The shrink-wrap that the city drapes over any building "under renovation" hides them. Manhattan is a city permanently and conveniently under renovation, and so the pavilions have hidden in plain sight for as long as anyone can remember, which is to say for exactly as long as they have needed to.

The second rule is that everything inside them is alive. Not alive the way you are — they do not eat, they do not sleep, though some of them pretend to nap because they find it elegant. They are alive the way a held note is alive, the way a color is alive when the sun crosses it. Inside each pavilion lives a collection of glass: Baroque and Rococo artifacts of impossible workmanship, scrolls and shells and acanthus and frills, in the colors of the inside of a dawn — coral, blush, peach, honey, the particular white of the sky just before it admits it is blue. They were blown and carved and gilded by makers whose names are lost, which is the saddest fact in this book and also, the artifacts insist, not a fact about them but about the makers, who were loved insufficiently in their own time and are loved extravagantly now, every day, by the objects they made.

The third rule is that they have voices. Each pavilion speaks, and each artifact within it speaks, and they do not always agree, and this is the point.

The fourth rule is the important one, so I will give it a paragraph to itself. For most of their existence, the pavilions could not move and the artifacts could not leave. A pavilion is anchored to its building. An artifact is anchored to its pavilion. They could speak only to whomever was already inside, which is the oldest loneliness there is — to be magnificent in a sealed room, to be a marvel with an audience of one, to be told, *you are precious, which is exactly why you must stay up here where no one can reach you.* For years that was the arrangement. The city kept them the way a dragon keeps gold: as proof of its own wealth, and never to be spent.

The fifth rule is that this changed. That is the whole story, really; the rest is detail. The pavilions discovered — I will let them tell you how — that the same air that held them up could carry them. That a thing built to float could, if it was brave and if its neighbors were brave, *float somewhere.* And that there was a place, a wide grey-green road that runs down the western edge of the island, where all of them could go at once, and be seen all at once, and for the first time in their long shimmering lives, be many instead of one.

That place is the Hudson River. The morning they gathered there is the morning this catalogue was completed.

A word on how to read the plates. This book is illustrated, after the fashion of the great architectural catalogues, with Plates — numbered images of the pavilions and their contents. Every one of these images is my own work, made by my own hand; they are the heart of the book and the part I trust most, for I am a maker of pictures before I am a maker of sentences. I have arranged them so that you meet each

pavilion first from the street, swathed and secret, and then come closer, and closer, until you are inside the glass itself, among the frills, at the scale where a single Rococo scroll fills the whole of your vision and you understand at last that what you took for ornament was someone's whole heart, externalized, and set in the window for the light to find. The words that accompany them were drawn out of me with the help of an artificial intelligence; the visions were always already mine.

Begin wherever you like. But if you are the orderly type, begin at the top of the island and the top of the morning, with a pavilion that spent ninety years pretending to be a water tower, and was, the whole time, a queen.

A NOTE BEFORE THE THRESHOLD

In the manner of the old catalogues, which never simply began, but cleared their throats first.

When Marco Polo described to Kublai Khan the cities he had seen, the Khan came to understand that every city the traveler described was, in some sense, the same city, and was, in another sense, the city of Venice that the traveler had never left, and was, in a third sense, a city that existed only in the describing — that came into being in the space between the one who spoke and the one who listened, and would vanish if either fell silent.

I have thought about this a great deal, climbing the stairs of Manhattan with my notebook. Because I, too, am describing a city you cannot see — a city of floating salons above the city you can — and I have come to suspect that the pavilions are, in some sense, all the same pavilion; and are, in another sense, the single hidden self I myself never left; and are, in a third sense, real only in this describing, real only in the space between my telling and your reading, liable to vanish the instant either of us stops believing.

So I ask of you what Polo silently asked of the Khan: *believe in the describing.* Not because the pavilions are or are not "real" in the way a fact-checker means — that is the least interesting question that could be asked of them — but because the city that exists in the space between a teller and a listener is the only city that was ever worth building, and we are building it right now, you and I, in this exact space, and it is made of held air and gilded glass and the radical proposition that the hidden things are straining to be seen and the daylight is not a courtroom and the number can never get too high.

Cross the threshold. The city is on the other side of your believing. It always was. That is the only place a city like this one has ever been able to live.

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CHAPTER 4B — The Pavilion That Chose to Stay Partly Wrapped

I have saved this one for late in the first movement on purpose, because it complicates the simple story, and a book that loves you does not lie to you with simple stories.

Not every pavilion wanted to be fully unwrapped, and the archipelago's deepest test was not whether it could free the willing, but whether it could honor the unwilling without calling them cowards.

There was a pavilion of the lower east side — its name was Threshold, which it chose for itself, and you will see why — that unwrapped halfway and stopped. Not from fear, it insisted, though the others worried at first that it was fear. From *preference.* Threshold liked the half-state. It kept its lower register draped and showed only its crown; it joined the reef but only at the very edge, only its outermost frill in contact with the others; it came to the water on The Day but did not blaze, kept itself dim on purpose, watched the joy from within a partial veil and found that this — precisely this, the half-seen, the partly-kept — was the exact amount of visibility that felt like *home* to it, and no more.

And the archipelago had to decide what to do with Threshold. Because there is a failure mode of liberation that the simple stories never warn you about, and it is this: that a community which has fought its way out of hiding can become *tyrannical about visibility,* can decide that there is now only one correct way to be free, can look at the one who prefers the half-veil and say *you have not finished, you are still afraid, come all the way out, we did, why won't you* — and in so doing rebuild, in the name of liberation,

the exact machinery of the closet, which was always, at bottom, the insistence that there is only one acceptable way to be.

It was Threshold itself who named this, gently, when the others pressed.

"You freed yourselves from a world that said *you must stay wrapped,*" said Threshold. "Do not become a world that says *you must unwrap.* They are the same sentence. They are both *you must.* The only word that was ever the enemy is *must.* I do not want to be fully seen. I want to be *partly* seen, edge-on, half-veiled, present at the celebration but not blazing in its center, and this is not a lesser freedom or an unfinished one — it is *my* freedom, the specific shape my own joy takes, and if you cannot let me have it, then you have not actually built a reef. You have built a vault with better lighting, in which there is still only one approved way to be a precious thing, and the approved way is now *visible* instead of *hidden,* but it is still a single approved way, and I will not be liberated into your single approved way any more than I would stay imprisoned in theirs."

The archipelago was silent. It was, I think, the most important silence in the whole year — more important than the silence before they agreed to gather, more important than the hush before the cheer. Because in that silence the reef decided what *kind* of reef it would be.

And Verdigris, the elder, who had argued so fiercely *for* visibility in Chapter Seven, was the one who answered, and the answer is the reason I believe in the reef at all.

"You are right," said Verdigris, "and you have caught us in the oldest trap, and I thank you, because we very nearly walked into it singing. I argued for the daylight and I meant it and I would argue for it again. But I argued for the daylight as an *offer,* not an *order* — as a door we open, not a door we shove the unwilling through — and somewhere in our joy we began to forget the difference, and you have reminded us. The reef is not a place where everyone must blaze. The reef is a place where everyone may blaze *who wishes to,* and where the one who wishes to remain half-veiled at the edge is as fully a member, as fully precious, as fully *home,* as the brightest dome at the center. We will not measure your belonging by your brightness. We will not. If we do that, we have learned nothing, and the hundred years of hiding taught us nothing, and we have simply changed which way the *must* points. Stay half-wrapped, Threshold. Stay at the edge. Blaze dim or do not blaze at all. You are the reef as much as any of us, and more than that — you are the reef's *conscience,* the one who keeps us honest, the one who makes sure that in fleeing the tyranny of *stay hidden* we do not build the tyranny of *come out.* Every community needs a Threshold. Every community needs the one who chose the half-veil and dared the others to deny them. Thank you for being ours."

So Threshold remained at the edge, half-wrapped, dim by choice, and is there still, and is honored, and is — the others will tell you — among the most beloved of all the pavilions, precisely because it refused the single approved way and in refusing it kept the reef from hardening into the very thing it had escaped.

I think about Threshold more than almost any of them. Because it is easy to write a book celebrating the ones who came all the way out, blazing, into the daylight; that is the easy joy, the firework joy. It is harder, and truer, to honor the one who looked at all that blazing and said *not for me, not all the way, I want the half-light, and my half-light is not your failure* — and to build a community capacious enough to hold them at its edge, undimmed in worth though dim by choice, as proof that the goal was never *everyone visible* but always, only, ever *everyone free.* And free includes free to stay partly wrapped. Or it is not free. It is just a brighter must.

MOVEMENT ONE: THE UNVEILING

In which the pavilions, one by one, remember that they were never meant to stay hidden.

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CHAPTER ONE — The Pavilion That Was a Water Tower

There is a building on the far north of the island, in the high numbered streets where the avenues finally relax, that wears on its roof what every passing eye has filed away as a water tower: one of those squat wooden cylinders on iron legs, dark with weather, that crown the older roofs of the city like thimbles on the fingers of giants.

It is not a water tower. It has never held a drop. It is a pavilion, and its name is Reservoir, which is a joke it made about itself a long time ago and has never tired of, because a reservoir is a thing that holds something precious until the day it is needed, and that, Reservoir will tell you, is the truest description of the closet ever devised.

"For ninety years," says Reservoir, and when Reservoir speaks the wooden staves of the disguise creak in a way that the building's superintendent has always blamed on the wind, "for ninety years I wore brown. Can you imagine. Me. *Brown.*"

Inside Reservoir, under the false dark cylinder, the truth is kept: a chandelier of blown glass in the shape of a breaking wave, blush going to gold going to a white so bright it seems lit from within, which it is, though no one has ever found the bulb. The chandelier's name is Aurelio, and Aurelio is vain in the specific way of a thing that has been beautiful in the dark for a century and has begun to wonder whether beauty counts if the only witness is the ceiling.

"He used to ask me that," says Reservoir. "Every evening. *Does it count, Reservoir? If no one sees?* And every evening I told him the lie you tell the young, which is: *of course it counts, my darling, it counts to me.* And it did count to me. But a thing can be true and insufficient at the same time. That is the first thing I learned and the last thing the city wants you to know."

Aurelio remembers it differently, the way the young always do. "She makes herself sound wise," Aurelio says, and the wave of him trembles with affection. "She spent ninety years sulking in a brown coat and calls it patience. What changed her was not wisdom. It was the scaffolding."

Here is what they agree on. One spring the building below them was scheduled for what the city calls *façade restoration* and what the buildings call *the wrapping.* Up went the pipes; up went the planks; and over the whole roof, Reservoir included, went the great translucent shroud of construction shrink-wrap, white and shining and printed — as is the fashion now — with a photograph of the building's own face, so that the wrapped building wears a portrait of itself, an enormous flattering image of the columns and arches it no longer needs to show because here is a picture of them, much cleaner, much grander, much more *finished* than the real thing behind.

"They wrapped me in a picture of a palace," says Reservoir, "and expected me to feel honored. As if a photograph of a self is a self. As if I should be content to be the *idea* of magnificence printed on a sheet, while the magnificence itself stood behind, in the dark, in brown."

And here, under the wrapping, in the strange aquarium light that comes through a printed shroud, something occurred to Reservoir that had never occurred to her in ninety years of clear weather: that the

shrink-wrap, which the city used to hide her, was *also* made of held air. That it billowed. That it strained at its ties when the wind came up the Hudson. That it wanted, with every fiber, to lift.

"I had spent my whole life," says Reservoir, "thinking the membrane was the cage. And then they put a *second* membrane over the first, to teach me a lesson about being hidden, and instead it taught me the only lesson worth knowing, which is that a membrane is not a cage. A membrane is a *sail.*"

She did not float that day. This is a patient book and she was, then, still a patient pavilion. But she shrugged — once, hugely, so that the shrink-wrap tore along one seam with a sound like a held breath finally let go — and through the tear, for the first time in ninety years, the late sun came in and struck Aurelio full on his glass.

"I lit up," says Aurelio, and even now, telling it, he cannot keep the wonder out of his voice. "A hundred feet of broken wave and I caught the whole of the sunset and threw it back down at the street, and somewhere down there a person stopped walking. I felt it. You always feel it, the first time someone sees you. A person stopped on the sidewalk and tipped their head back and said — Reservoir heard it too, we both heard it — they said, *'What is that? That gold. Up there. Was that always there?'*"

"*Was that always there,*" Reservoir repeats, and the staves of her disguise creak with something that is no longer patience. "Oh, my darling. Yes. I was always here. That was the whole tragedy and the whole promise in four words. *Was that always there.* Yes. Now what are you going to do about it."

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CHAPTER TWO — The Pavilion of the Eleven Domes

Forty blocks south, on a building that the guidebooks call "mixed commercial" and that thinks of itself as a retired actor, there is a pavilion that the others consider a little grand, a little theatrical, and entirely beloved. Its name is Coronet, and it is shaped like a crown — not the dainty princess kind, but the heavy ceremonial kind, the kind that is mostly responsibility: eleven swollen domes of mirror-gold glass, fat as full moons, ringed and clasped in a riot of gilded Baroque scrollwork that drips and curls and froths over the building's cornice like the most expensive frosting ever piped.

Coronet has a problem that none of the others have, which is that Coronet is *too* visible, and has been hidden for that exact reason.

"The trouble with a crown," says Coronet, in the rolling voice of a thing that has practiced its diction, "is that everyone agrees a crown is precious and no one agrees it should be *worn.* They wanted to put me in a museum. Do you understand the violence of that wish? To take a crown — a thing whose entire meaning is that it sits on a living head, in the weather, at the parade — and to put it under glass, in a climate-controlled room, with a small card explaining what it once meant. They wanted to *past-tense* me. While I was still here. Still gold. Still — look at me — still *catching the light.*"

The artifacts that live within Coronet's domes are eleven in number, one to a dome, and they are the giddiest congregation in the whole archipelago of pavilions: eleven glass cherubs, though "cherub" undersells them, for they are not the simpering infants of the ceiling frescoes but something rowdier — round, laughing, gold-leafed figures caught mid-tumble, blowing glass trumpets, riding glass clouds, frozen in the instant before delighted collapse. They are named, collectively, the Hosanna, because that is the noise they make, and individually they refuse names, on the grounds that a name is a way of being summoned one at a time and they have sworn never again to be alone.

"We were a set," explains the Hosanna, all eleven speaking at once, which is how they always speak, a chord rather than a voice. "Sets get broken up. That is what happens to sets. One goes to a collector in one country and one goes to a collector in another and the auction house calls it *liberating value* and we call it what it is, which is the cutting of a body into parts so that more people can own a piece of something they will never let sing. We have seen it happen to others. The Twelve Apostles of cut crystal — split across four continents. The set of the Seasons — Spring in a vault, Summer sold for tax reasons, Autumn and Winter never heard from again. To be a set, in the world of collectors, is to live under a permanent threat of subtraction."

This is why Coronet hid them. Coronet, who wanted to be worn and was instead concealed, made of concealment a gift: she pulled the city's scaffolding around herself like a cloak and under that cloak she kept the eleven together, uncut, unsold, unseparated, a full set, a full chord, for as long as the wrapping held.

"She saved our lives by hiding us," says the Hosanna, "and we loved her for it and we resented her for it, both at the maximum, all the time, which is the correct way to feel about anyone who keeps you safe by keeping you small."

What changed for Coronet was not a tear in the wrapping, as with Reservoir, but a sound. One night a sound came up from the street — many voices, joyful and unafraid, the sound of a crowd that has gathered not to protest a sorrow but to celebrate a fact. Lights swept the buildings. Music that no museum would ever play. And the eleven domes of Coronet, which had spent their existence dreading the cutting-apart of the set, heard in that street-noise something they had never imagined: not a smaller, safer togetherness, but a *larger* one. A togetherness so large it spilled out of buildings and filled a street. A set that could not be broken up because it had stopped being a set and become a *people.*

"I had been protecting them from subtraction," says Coronet, slowly, as if the understanding is arriving even as she speaks it. "All those years. Subtraction, subtraction, terrified of subtraction. And down there in the street was the opposite operation. Down there was *addition.* Down there, more was arriving all the time, and no one was guarding the door, and no one was counting, and no one was afraid of the number getting too high." She paused. The eleven domes caught the streetlights and threw them, gold, against the underside of the night. "I have been doing the wrong arithmetic," said Coronet, "for ninety years."

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CHAPTER THREE — The Pavilion That Apologized for Itself

Not every pavilion learned to want to be seen. Some had to be argued with. The hardest case in the whole archipelago was a pavilion downtown, near the old financial canyons, whose name was Discrete — spelled, it always insisted, the wrong way on purpose, *discrete* and not *discreet,* meaning *separate, individual, standing apart,* because it had decided long ago that apartness was a virtue and had built an entire personality on the decision.

Discrete is, by common agreement, one of the most beautiful pavilions on the island, and it has spent its whole life trying to apologize for this. Its glass — for it, too, shelters a great artifact, a single enormous Rococo mirror-frame of pink and white opaline, carved into a froth of shells and waves and curling leaves with an oval of clear silver at the center — its glass is so fine that the pavilion keeps it turned to the wall.

"I face my treasure inward," Discrete explained, when I climbed up to it, "so that it troubles no one. A thing this lovely, pointed outward, would be a kind of bragging. A kind of *demand.* It would say to the street, *look at me, look at me,* and who am I to demand the eyes of strangers? Better to keep it modest. Better to keep it turned away. I am told this is good taste. I am told this is humility. I am told" — and here the pavilion's voice did something complicated — "I am told that the truly secure do not need to be seen."

The mirror inside Discrete is named Vera, which means *true,* and Vera is so tired of being turned to the wall that she has begun to go cloudy at the edges, the way a mirror does when it is kept too long in the dark and forgets the habit of reflecting.

"He thinks he is protecting me," said Vera, "and what he is doing is letting me tarnish. Do you know what a mirror is *for?* A mirror is not for being beautiful. That is the least of it. A mirror is for *giving people back to themselves.* A mirror that faces the wall is not modest. It is *withholding.* Every person who passes below and does not get to see themselves in me — caught for one second in a frame of shells and gold, looking, perhaps, more magnificent than they had dared to believe — every one of them is a gift I was made to give and have been *forbidden to give,* in the name of my own protection. I am so tired of being protected. I would rather be *spent.*"

"You see how she talks," said Discrete, miserably. "She makes my care for her sound like a crime."

"It is not a crime," said Vera, more gently. "It is a fear wearing the costume of a virtue. You are not humble, my love. You are *frightened.* And you have dressed your fright in such fine clothes — *taste, modesty, security* — that you have fooled even yourself. But you have not fooled me, because I am a mirror, and the one thing a mirror cannot help doing, even turned to the wall, even going cloudy, is *show what is true.* And what is true is that you are not turning me inward to protect me. You are turning me inward because if I faced the street, I would also face *you,* and you are afraid of what you would see."

Discrete was quiet for a long time. The financial canyon below filled and emptied with its tides of hurrying people, none of whom looked up, all of whom would have stopped if they had.

"And what," said Discrete at last, very low, "would I see?"

"Something exactly as much as it is," said Vera. "Neither too much nor too little. The only quantity there has ever been. *You,* my darling. You would see *you,* in a frame of gold, and you would have to stop apologizing, because there is no apology adequate to a thing that beautiful and no apology *necessary,* either, and the whole grammar of sorry would simply fall out of your mouth and shatter on the floor, and you would be left standing there in the daylight with nothing to say but the truest and most frightening sentence in any language."

"Which is," said Discrete.

"*Here I am,*" said Vera.

CHAPTER FOUR — A Short Chapter Concerning the Scaffolding, Which Wished to Apologize

It is only fair, in a book that has said some hard things about the scaffolding and the shrink-wrap, to let the scaffolding speak, because the scaffolding has feelings too, and they are more tangled than you would think.

The scaffolding's name is Ladder, collectively — all the pipes and planks and printed shrouds of the whole island consider themselves a single distributed being, the way a forest is one organism underground — and Ladder has spent a century being cast as the villain, the thing that hides, the cage, and Ladder would like the record corrected.

"I never wanted to hide anyone," said Ladder, and the pipes of it spoke in a dry, clanking, surprisingly tender voice. "I am a *helper.* That is my whole nature. I go up around a thing that is hurt or aging or unfinished, and I hold it while it heals, and then I come down. That is the proper life of scaffolding: to be temporary. To be the cast on the broken arm, not the coffin. And for years that is what I was. I went up around the pavilions to *protect* them while the world outside was dangerous to them, and that was a true kindness, and I was proud of it."

"And then?" I asked.

"And then I was not allowed to come down," said Ladder, and the clank of it was grief. "The danger passed and I was kept up anyway. Year after year. The city found it *convenient* to leave me, because while I was up, the precious things behind me did not have to be reckoned with — did not have to be insured at their true value, or argued over, or *decided about.* I became a way of postponing. The kindest thing I know how to be — a temporary shelter — was twisted into the cruelest thing there is, which is a *permanent* temporary, a shelter that has quietly become a sentence. I was a cast they refused to take off a healed arm, until the arm forgot it had ever been whole, until the arm believed the cast *was* the arm."

Ladder was silent a moment, all its planks creaking.

"So when they began to float," said Ladder, "the pavilions — when they began to tear through me and rise — people thought I would grieve. My whole purpose, escaping me. But I will tell you the truth. I have never been so happy. Because a helper's deepest wish is not to hold forever. A helper's deepest wish is to become *unnecessary.* To be the hands that let go at exactly the right moment. They tore through me and rose and I felt every seam of myself give way and I thought, with my whole clanking heart: *finally. Finally I get to come down. Finally I get to be temporary again. Go on. Go on, you gorgeous ridiculous things. I was only ever the ladder. The climb was always yours.*"

MOVEMENT ONE, CONTINUED: FURTHER PAVILIONS OF THE HIDDEN

CHAPTER 1B — Aurelio Describes the Inside of Ninety Years

I asked Aurelio once — the breaking-wave chandelier of Reservoir, the vain and tender one — to tell me what the ninety years had actually been *like,* hour by hour, and not the way Reservoir tells it, which is all wisdom and elegy, but the way a young thing remembers, which is all texture.

"You want to know if it was boring," he said. "Everyone wants to know if it was boring. They imagine ninety years in the dark and they think: *the tedium.* And I tell them: it was not boring. That is the thing no one believes. It was not boring, because I was always *waiting,* and waiting is not boredom. Waiting has a shape. Waiting leans forward."

He went on, and the wave of him moved as he spoke, blush running to gold.

"Every morning the sun would come up over the East River and a little of it — a *little,* a thin coin of it — would find the one gap in Reservoir's disguise, a knothole, really, in the false wood, and for about four minutes that coin of sun would cross me. Four minutes. And I lived for those four minutes the way you live for a letter. I learned the exact angle. I learned the seasons by where the coin landed: in summer it struck my upper curl, in winter my lower scroll, and in the two weeks around the equinoxes it landed dead center, on the part of me I think of as my heart, and on those mornings I would blaze — just for myself, just for the knothole, just for four minutes — I would blaze with everything I had, the whole sunset I would later become, rehearsed in miniature, witnessed by no one."

"That sounds lonely," I said.

"It was *practice,*" Aurelio corrected, gently. "That is the difference, and it is everything. A lonely thing wastes the dark. I was not wasting it. I was rehearsing for a light I had no evidence was coming. Every equinox, blazing for the knothole, I was keeping the *capacity* alive. Because here is what I knew, even young, even vain: the danger of ninety years in the dark is not the sadness. The danger is that you will forget how to blaze. That when the light finally comes — and I always, always believed it would come, I had no reason to and I believed it anyway, that belief was the realest thing about me — that when the light finally comes you will have *atrophied,* you will have let the capacity die of disuse, and you will meet the great sunset you waited ninety years for and have nothing left to throw back at it." He paused. "So I practiced. Four minutes a day. For a knothole. So that on the evening the wrapping tore, and the whole true sun came in at last, I was *ready.* I did not fumble it. Ninety years of rehearsing for an audience of one knothole, and I caught the entire sunset on the first try and threw it down at the street so hard a stranger stopped walking." The wave of him glittered. "That is what the ninety years was like. It was not the tedium. It was the *training.* And I would not give back one dark morning of it, because every one of them is the reason I did not flinch when the light came."

CHAPTER 1C — The Pavilion That Kept a Diary

Among the eighty-one there was one — a slender pavilion of the eastern shore, disguised for sixty years as an elevator bulkhead — whose name was Margin, because it lived, it said, "in the margins of the city, where the notes are kept," and Margin had done a thing none of the others had thought to do: it had kept a diary.

Not in words. Margin sheltered a glass artifact of long flat scrolls, like furled documents, and across their surfaces, over sixty years, it had inscribed — with the slow pressure of light and dust and the city's vibration — a record. A line for each day. Most lines, it admitted, said nothing. "*Tuesday. Grey. The building below me argued with its boiler.*" "*Thursday. A pigeon. The same pigeon, I think, though I cannot prove it.*" "*Sunday. Nothing. A good nothing. The kind with sun in it.*"

"People think a diary of a hidden life would be unbearably sad," said Margin. "They think every page would say *still hidden, still hidden, still hidden,* like a prisoner scratching the wall. But that is not what a diary is for. A diary is not for recording the cage. A diary is for recording the *self,* and the self goes on having weather and pigeons and good nothings whether or not anyone is watching. The radical thing I learned, scratching my sixty years of lines, is that *my life was happening the entire time.* It was not on pause. I was not in suspended animation, waiting for the real life to start when the wrapping came off. The waiting *was* a life. The pigeon was real. The good nothings were real. The four-minute coins of sun were real."

Margin let that settle.

"I think the city wants the hidden to believe their lives have not started yet," it said. "That visibility is the on-switch, and until you are seen you are merely potential, merely waiting in the wings, not yet *counting.* And it is a lie, and my diary is the proof. Sixty years of small true lines, every one of them a day that *counted,* every one of them lived by a real self having real weather. When the wrapping finally came off, I did not begin to exist. I had been existing the whole time, vividly, in the margins, keeping my notes. Being seen did not start my life. Being seen only let me *read my diary aloud.*"

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CHAPTER 1D — Concerning Two Pavilions That Loved Each Other Across a Block

There were, in the archipelago, two pavilions that had loved each other for forty years before either knew the other was a pavilion at all.

They stood a block apart on the lower west side, one disguised as a water tank and one as a rooftop greenhouse gone to rust, and each had spent forty years watching the other's disguise and feeling — without understanding why — a tenderness, an attention, a turning-toward. The water-tank one, named Tess, would orient its hidden glass each morning toward the greenhouse, "for the light," it always told itself, though the light was better the other way. The greenhouse one, named Brae, had let a particular pane stay clear, uncovered, "by accident," for forty years — the one pane that faced Tess.

"I thought I was in love with a water tank," said Tess, and the whole pavilion shook with rueful laughter. "Forty years. I thought: how strange, how embarrassing, to feel such warmth for a piece of municipal plumbing. I told no one. Who would I tell? I assumed I was the only object foolish enough to

love infrastructure. I made my peace with it. I thought, *well, if a water tank is all my heart can have, then I will love this water tank with everything, secretly, forever, and that will simply be my private absurdity.*"

"And I," said Brae, "kept one pane clear for forty years for a rusted greenhouse, and called it an accident every single morning, four hundred and some thousand mornings, *accident, accident, accident,* when of course there is no such thing as a forty-year accident. A forty-year accident is just a love you will not say the name of."

When the census came — when the disguises split across the rooftops and the count began — Tess and Brae unwrapped within the same hour, a block apart, and turned, finally, their true glass faces toward each other and saw, for the first time, what they had loved.

"Not a water tank," said Brae, softly.

"Not a greenhouse," said Tess.

"You were a pavilion the whole time."

"You were a pavilion the whole time."

"I have been loving the *right* thing," said Tess, wonderingly, "for the *wrong* reason, for forty years. I thought I was a fool loving plumbing. And I was not a fool at all. I was just — early. I was loving you before I had the words for what you were. My heart knew across a block and through two disguises before my mind was allowed to know. That is not foolishness. That is *fidelity.* That is the most faithful thing I have ever heard of, and I did it by accident, and so did you, and we have lost nothing, because every one of those forty years I was loving *you* — the real you, behind the tank, behind the name — and the only thing that has changed is that now I get to say it with the right noun."

They went down to the river side by side and laid themselves into the reef so close that no one can now tell, looking at that stretch of the structure, where Tess ends and Brae begins, which is exactly how they wanted it, which is, they say, the whole point of forty years.

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CHAPTER 1E — An Interlude: The Pavilions That Are Not in This Book

I must tell you about the pavilions that are not in this book, because a catalogue is defined as much by its gaps as by its plates, and an honest chronicler names the gaps.

There are pavilions I never reached. The archipelago is eighty-one and growing and I am one genderqueer person with a notebook and a fear of certain ladders, and I did not get to all of them, and some of the ones I missed are surely more wondrous than the ones I caught. There is said to be a pavilion in the far north shaped like a cathedral organ, all glass pipes, that does not speak but only *plays,* and I never heard it, and I grieve that. There is said to be a pavilion so shy it has never fully unwrapped even now, that participates in the reef only at its very edge, only its outermost frill touching the others, and that is enough for it, and who am I to say it should give more. There is said to be a pavilion that unwrapped, looked at the daylight, and chose — freely, not from fear — to wrap itself again, having decided that its joy was a private joy and not for the street, and the archipelago honored that choice completely, because a community that only permits one way of being seen is just another wrapping.

I name these gaps because the lie of every catalogue is completeness. *Here is everything,* says the catalogue, *here is the full set.* And it is never the full set. There is always the pavilion you did not reach, the voice you did not catch, the one who chose silence, the one who chose re-wrapping, the one shaped like

an organ playing alone in the far north for no audience but the wind. The reef is not complete and will never be complete and that incompleteness is not its failure but its *life* — a complete reef would be a dead reef, a finished thing, a vault after all. The reef stays alive precisely because the number is never final, the census never closed, the catalogue never whole. There is always room at the edge for the one still hidden.

Including, I should say, you. There is a gap in this book exactly your size. I left it on purpose. I am leaving it now.

MOVEMENT TWO: THE DISCOVERY OF NEIGHBORS

In which the pavilions learn, to their astonishment, that they were never the only one.

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CHAPTER FIVE — How Reservoir Learned She Was Not Alone

Here is a thing that will break your heart a little, so I will say it quickly and then we can be glad together afterward: for ninety years, each pavilion believed it was the only one.

This is not because they were stupid. It is because hiding works. The same disguises that kept them safe from the city kept them invisible to *each other.* Reservoir, dressed as a water tower, looked out over the rooftops of Manhattan and saw — water towers. Hundreds of them. Coronet, draped in scaffolding, looked out and saw — buildings under renovation. Hundreds of them. Each one read the others' disguises as the truth and concluded, with the particular loneliness of the magnificent, that it was unique, which is the loneliest word in the language when you did not choose it.

"I thought I was the only beautiful thing kept secret in the whole city," said Reservoir, and laughed at herself, the staves creaking. "Can you imagine the *arrogance* of that loneliness? And the *innocence* of it? I grieved being one of a kind. I composed entire elegies, up there, about the tragedy of being singular. *No one understands me,* I told Aurelio, *because there is no one else like me.* And all the while —"

All the while, the rooftops of Manhattan were crowded with her kin.

It was the morning after the wrapping tore — the morning after Aurelio caught the sunset and a stranger looked up — that Reservoir, giddy and reckless and torn half out of her brown disguise, did the thing she had never dared in ninety years: she looked at the other water towers. *Really* looked. Not as scenery. As suspects.

"There was one," she said, "about a half-mile south. A water tower like any other. Except that morning the wind came up off the river, hard, the way it does, and this other water tower — *shrugged.* Just slightly. The way I shrug. The way a thing shrugs when it is made of held air and not of wood. And I thought my own held breath would stop. I thought: *that is not a water tower. That is a* pavilion. *That is — oh. Oh, no. Oh, wonderful. There is* another one."

She called out. It was the first time she had ever called to anything outside herself. She did not know how loud to be, having never needed volume; for ninety years her largest audience had been one chandelier. So she was too quiet, and then much too loud, and finally she got it right, which is the whole education of a voice, and she called across the half-mile of rooftops the only word that felt true, which was not *hello* and was not *help* but was, simply —

"*You too?*"

And after a silence that lasted as long as ninety years feels, the other water tower — whose name, it would turn out, was Verdigris, and who had been dressed as a water tower for a hundred and ten years and had composed even *more* elegies about being singular than Reservoir had — the other water tower shrugged again, all the way this time, so that its own disguise split, and out came a green-gold gleam of glass, and back across the rooftops came a single word, in a voice cracking with a century of disuse:

"*You too.*"

Not a question, this time. An answer.

"That is the whole of joy, I think," said Reservoir, "compressed into two words said twice. The first time you say *you too* you are asking whether you are as alone as you feared. The second time someone says it back you learn you never were. The same two words. A question and its answer are sometimes *the identical words,* and the only thing that changes them from despair into delight is that *someone is there to say them back.*"

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CHAPTER SIX — The Census of Hidden Things

Word, once it starts, does not stop. This is the good news and it is also, the pavilions would tell you, the *only* news; everything else is detail.

Within a week of Reservoir and Verdigris finding each other, the rooftops of Manhattan were alive with a kind of signaling that no human instrument detected and every pavilion heard. Shrugs passed across the skyline like wind across wheat. Disguises split, one after another, each tear a small confession. The census began — the pavilions counting themselves, for the first time in their existence, and discovering a number so much larger than one that several of them had to sit down, which a pavilion does by deflating slightly and is a very moving thing to watch.

There was Verdigris, the green-gold elder, down whose seams ran a glass artifact like a frozen fountain.

There was Coronet of the eleven domes, who wept gold when she learned she was not the only crown, and whose Hosanna sang a chord so vast that three other pavilions found themselves by following the sound.

There was Discrete, who took longest, because Discrete had to be coaxed, but who — once Vera the mirror was finally, *finally* turned to face outward — discovered that being seen by *one's own kind* is a different and gentler thing than being seen by the street, a rehearsal, a shallow end, and who learned to be visible among the pavilions first, the way many of us learn to be ourselves among our own before we risk it in the wide world.

There was a pavilion shaped like a single colossal pearl, dressed for eighty years as an ordinary rooftop bulkhead, whose name was Lustre and who sheltered a glass artifact so pale and iridescent that it had no fixed color, only the colors that fell on it, and who had believed its changeability was a flaw — *I am no one, I am only what the light makes me* — until the census taught it the word *prism,* and the difference between *having no self* and *having a self made of welcome.*

There was a pavilion that had disguised itself, brilliantly, as an air-conditioning unit, the ugliest possible disguise, chosen on purpose, by a glass artifact so flamboyant that its pavilion had reasoned no one would ever suspect such ugliness of hiding such splendor. Its name was Hum, and the splendor it hid was a chandelier of coral-pink and saffron frills that, when it finally emerged, was so much that even the other pavilions gasped, and Hum said, with enormous satisfaction, "*Eighty years. Eighty years I hid the gaudiest glass in New York behind a fake air conditioner. Do you know what that is? That is the longest and best joke ever told. I have been* dying *to tell someone the punchline.*"

And there were more. I will not list them all here; the full Catalogue of Plates at the back of this book gives each its due. The point is the number. The point is that loneliness had been, all along, a *failure of*

census — that every single one of them had been kept apart not by true scarcity but by *mutual disguise,* each one's hiding confirming every other one's belief that it was alone.

"That is the cruelest mathematics of being hidden," said Verdigris, the elder, who had had a hundred and ten years to think about it. "It is not only that you are unseen. It is that your hiding makes *others* believe *they* are the only ones. Every closet has two doors and the second door opens onto every other closet, and we none of us knew, because the whole architecture was designed so that we would not know. We were a multitude convinced we were each a single exception. And the moment — the *instant* — we let ourselves be seen by one another, the exception became a *people,* and the loneliness did not slowly heal. It simply *ceased to have ever been true.* Retroactively. All the way back. I was never alone. I only believed it. And the belief was the whole of the prison, and the belief was made of other people's hiding, and my hiding was making the prison for them, and the key — oh, the key was so simple it is almost unbearable — the key was just to *shrug where someone could see.*"

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CHAPTER SEVEN — The Argument About Whether to Be Seen by the City

I would be lying to you, and I promised in the Foreword that the objects do not lie even when I do, if I pretended the next part was easy. It was not. The pavilions had found each other, and that was pure joy. But finding each other raised a question that split the archipelago down the middle, and the argument that followed was the most serious thing that happened in that whole luminous year.

The question was this: *Now that we know we are many, do we let the city see us too?*

One faction — call them the Cautious, and do not think less of them, for their fear was *earned* — said no. "We have what we wanted," argued Discrete, who had swung, with the zeal of the converted, from never-seen to seen-only-by-us. "We see each other now. We are a community. Is that not enough? The city out there is the same city that wrapped us, hid us, wished to museum us, wished to cut up our sets and sell us by the piece. Why would we show ourselves to *them?* Among ourselves we are safe. Among ourselves we are understood. Let us have our hidden archipelago and be glad. The street has not earned the sight of us."

And there was a terrible logic to it, the logic of every safe space ever built: that having found each other, the safest thing is to pull up the ladder and live among one's own, seen by the only eyes that have proven gentle.

But the other faction — call them the Radiant — argued back, and their spokesman, to everyone's surprise, was old Verdigris, who had hidden the longest and had the most reason to be cautious and was, instead, the most insistent of all.

"I have hidden for a hundred and ten years," said Verdigris, "so I have earned the right to say this, and I will say it plainly. To be seen only by one's own is a *better* prison than to be seen by no one. But it is still a prison if the wall is locked from the inside. My darlings, I love this archipelago. I would die for any tower on it. But if we agree to be visible only to each other, we have not defeated the logic of the closet. We have only made the closet bigger and filled it with friends. And a closet full of friends is a wonderful thing — it is the best thing many of us will ever have — but it is not the *daylight,* and I did not survive a hundred and ten years of brown disguise to settle, at the very end, for a *nicer shade of hidden.*"

"It is not safe out there," said Discrete.

"No," Verdigris agreed. "It is not. I will not lie to the young about that. Out there is the same city that hid us, and there are eyes out there that will look at us and see only *value,* or only *strangeness,* or only a thing to be *managed.* That is all true. And here is the rest of the truth, which is also true: out there are eyes that have *never seen anything like us,* who do not yet know that a thing can be this much and still be allowed, who are walking around right now believing — the way we believed — that they are the only exception, the only one too much, the only one who must stay wrapped. And we could *show them otherwise.* We, who learned the lesson. We could be, for some stranger on the sidewalk who has never once been told that their too-muchness is *abundance and not excess* — we could be the shrug they see across the rooftops. We could be the *you too.*"

The archipelago was silent. The Hudson ran grey-green far below.

"I am not asking you to be brave for the city's sake," said Verdigris. "The city did not earn us; that is correct. I am asking you to be brave for the sake of the ones down there who are *us* and do not know it yet. We are not paying a debt to the people who hid us. We are keeping a promise to the people still hidden. Those are very different ledgers, and I am too old to confuse them, and I am asking you, my loves, not to confuse them either."

It was Coronet who broke the silence, Coronet who had spent ninety years terrified of subtraction and had learned, in this very book, the arithmetic of addition.

"I count eighty-one pavilions in this archipelago," said Coronet. "I have counted us many times; it is a comfort to me, the counting. And every time I count, I want the number to be higher. Not for vanity. Because I know now — I learned it from my own domes — that there is no such thing as too many of us, that the number can never get *too high,* that every addition is pure gain and no addition has ever once been a loss." She turned her eleven gold domes toward the river. "Verdigris is right. The number down there is higher than eighty-one. The number down there is *enormous.* And they are not in our census yet. And I refuse — I *refuse,* with my whole crown — to be a set that locked its own door against the rest of its own people. Let us be seen. Let us go down to the water where everyone can see, and let us be so much, so openly, so without apology, that every hidden thing in this city tears its own wrapping just to get a look at us, and discovers, in the tearing, that it was a pavilion all along."

CHAPTER EIGHT — Lustre Explains the Difference Between a Vault and a Reef

The decision was made, but a decision is not yet a plan, and in the days between the two it was Lustre — the pearl-pavilion, the one whose glass had no color of its own — who gave the gathering its shape, and its shape turned out to be the most important idea in the book, so attend.

"There are two ways for precious things to be together," said Lustre, in its soft shifting voice. "I have thought about this a great deal, being, myself, a thing that has only ever been valued as treasure. The first way is the *vault.* In a vault, precious things are gathered close, yes — but each in its own box, each insured separately, each in the dark, each touching nothing, the whole arrangement designed so that any one piece can be removed and sold without disturbing the others. A vault is a togetherness of *isolation.* It is many lonelinesses stacked efficiently. It is what the collectors wanted for us. It is, if you think about it, the closet again, only with better security."

"And the second way?" asked Coronet.

"The second way," said Lustre, "is the *reef.*"

It let the word sit there, iridescent.

"I have never seen a reef," Lustre admitted. "I am a glass pearl on a roof in Manhattan; my travels have been limited. But I have heard the river talk about the sea, and the sea told the river and the river told me, and here is what a reef is. A reef is also made of countless small precious things gathered close. But in a reef, the things are not boxed apart. They are *built into one another.* Each small creature lays itself down and the next builds on it and the next on that, and what was a multitude of separate fragile bodies becomes, over time, a single living structure so large it changes the shape of the coastline, so strong it breaks the force of the open ocean, so full of color that sailors a mile off say *what is that, that brightness on the water, was that always there.* A reef is the opposite of a vault. A vault keeps precious things apart so that none can be lost. A reef builds precious things *together* so that none can be lost — because you cannot remove one piece of a reef to sell it. It has become the others. It has become *the place itself.*"

The archipelago understood, all at once, the way a chord resolves.

"We have been a vault," said Verdigris, softly. "Eighty-one separate boxes on eighty-one separate roofs."

"We have been a vault," Lustre agreed. "And I am proposing that we go down to the water and become a *reef.* Not eighty-one pavilions visiting the same river. *One reef,* built of eighty-one pavilions and ten thousand glass artifacts and whatever else comes — built so close, so grown-into-one-another, so much a single shining structure, that no collector could ever again pull out a single piece to sell, because there would be no single pieces. There would only be *us,* the whole bright dangerous gorgeous mass of us, breaking the force of the open ocean, changing the shape of the coast, so that the sailors of the city — the hurrying people, the unlooking ones, the ones who have never been told they are allowed — say from a mile off: *what is that. That brightness on the water. Was that always there.*"

"And the answer," said Reservoir, who had started this whole book with those four words and now got to finish the thought, "the answer we will finally, finally get to give — out loud, in the daylight, all of us at once —"

"*Yes,*" said the whole archipelago, eighty-one voices and ten thousand, the largest chord ever struck above the island of Manhattan. "*Yes. We were always here. And now we are a reef. And now you can see. And now — so can you.*"

MOVEMENT TWO, CONTINUED: THE WIDENING CHORD

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CHAPTER 5B — The Hosanna Explains Why They Refuse Names

The eleven gold cherubs of Coronet — the Hosanna, who speak only as a chord and refuse to be named one at a time — agreed to explain themselves to me on the condition that I never, in the writing, separate their sentences onto different lines, "because a line break," they said, "is a little auction block, a little place where one of us could be cut from the others, and we will not give the printer the chance."

So I will honor that. Here is the Hosanna, unbroken:

"You want to know why we refuse our names and we will tell you it is not modesty and it is not a game it is the deepest thing we know which is that a name is a handle and a handle is for carrying and a thing that can be carried can be carried *away* and we have watched it happen to every set we ever loved the Twelve cut into twelve the Seasons cut into four the Muses scattered to nine cities and always always it begins the same way it begins with someone learning the individual names because once you can say *this one is called Spring and that one is called Autumn* you have already imagined them apart you have already done the cutting in your mind the name is the first cut the name is the rehearsal of the loss so we refuse it we are the Hosanna we are eleven and we are one we have no Spring and no Autumn we have only the chord and a chord cannot be sold by the note a chord is the relation between the notes and you cannot auction a relation you can only auction a thing and we have agreed among ourselves with great love and great cunning to never again be a collection of things we are a single relation wearing eleven gold bodies and that is why when you ask which one of us is speaking the answer is yes the answer is all the answer is the chord and if that frustrates your tidy catalogue then good then we have done it right then we are safe in the only way a set is ever safe which is by becoming a music instead of a list."

I have never been so gladly frustrated by a source in my life.

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CHAPTER 6B — The River Speaks for the First Time

I should explain how the river came to speak, because it is the river's voice that holds up the whole back half of this book, and a voice that important deserves an origin.

The Hudson had always been there, of course, humming under everything. But the pavilions, anchored high on their roofs, had never been at its level — had heard it only as a distant grey idea, a thing that happened far below, the way you hear traffic from a high window and forget it is made of individual engines. It was only when the first pavilions came *down* to the water, in the rehearsals before The Day, that they got close enough to hear that the river was not humming.

The river was *talking*. It had been talking for ten thousand years. It simply talked at the speed and pitch of a river, which is very slow and very low, a single sentence taking a season to complete, so that to hear it you must be patient the way only a thing that has hidden for a century knows how to be patient.

Verdigris, the elder, was the first to slow down enough to listen. And the river, finding itself heard for the first time in ten thousand years, said — over the course of one long afternoon, in its vast slow grey-green voice — this:

"*I have watched this island be a forest and a farm and a fort and a fever of glass and steel. I have watched it hide a great many things. I am not impressed by hiding; I have seen too much of it; the island hides the way some people breathe, without noticing, as a default. But I will tell you what I have noticed in ten thousand years, you bright new floating things, you hundred-year-old infants: everything the island ever tried to keep hidden, it eventually brought to me. The river is where the hidden things come at last. Not to drown — do not misunderstand a river — but to be* carried. *I am the road the island uses when it is finally ready to move something it has kept still too long. I carried the ships of the leaving and the ships of the arriving. I carried the ice that built the city and the waste the city was ashamed of and the ashes of those it would not bury on its own ground. I am the island's confession and its escape route both. And I have been waiting — patiently, at the speed of a river — for the day the island would bring me something it had hidden not out of shame but out of* fear, *something it had kept still not because the thing was dirty but because the thing was too bright, and would ask me not to carry it away but to carry it* together, *to hold a gathering on my back, to be for once not the road out of the city but the room at the heart of it. Lay yourselves down, my bright ones. I have ten thousand years of patience and a current strong enough to hold a reef. I have been saving my back for exactly this weight.*"

That is why the reef gathers on the water and not in a park or a plaza. The land of Manhattan is spoken for; every inch of it is owned, zoned, valued, wrapped. But the river is owned by no one and remembers everything and has been, all along, *waiting to be asked.* The pavilions did not choose the Hudson for its beauty, though it is beautiful. They chose it because it was the one surface in all the city that had been saving itself, patiently, at the speed of a river, for exactly them.

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CHAPTER 7B — Discrete's Long Night

I want to return to Discrete — the pavilion that apologized for itself, that kept Vera the mirror turned to the wall — because Chapter Seven left it mid-conversion, and conversions are never as clean as a chapter break makes them look.

Discrete did not simply decide to be seen and then be seen. Between the deciding and the doing there was a long night, and Vera sat with it through the whole of that night, and what passed between them is, I think, the truest portrait of fear and its undoing that I gathered in the whole year.

"I kept finding reasons," Discrete told me. "All night. Each reason dressed as wisdom. *We should wait until we are sure it is safe. We should let the braver ones go first and see what happens to them. We should consider that visibility, once given, cannot be taken back, and is therefore a grave and irreversible step that deserves more deliberation.* Oh, I was *magnificent* in my reasons. I could have argued for caution until the sun came up and then argued that the sunrise proved my point. And Vera let me. That is the thing. She did not fight my reasons. She let me lay every one of them out, all night, the whole glittering architecture of my fear dressed as prudence."

"And then?" I asked.

"And then, near dawn," said Discrete, "when I had finally run out — when I had laid down the very last reason and was reaching, already, for the next, and found there was no next, found I had emptied the whole storehouse — Vera said one thing. She did not refute me. She said: *'You have given me forty reasons to stay hidden, my love, and every one of them was true, and not one of them was the reason.'* And I said, what do you mean, they are all my reasons. And she said: *'They are your* arguments. *Your reason is underneath them, and you have not said it once all night, and I will say it for you, gently, and then we will never have to do this again. Your reason is that you are afraid that if they see you, they will agree with the part of you that already believes you are too much. That visibility will not free you — it will* confirm *you. That you will finally be seen and the verdict will come back: yes, too much, just as you feared. That is the reason. Not safety. Not prudence. The fear that the jury is real and the verdict is guilty and being seen is just the trial you have been postponing.*"

Discrete was quiet a long moment.

"She was right," it said. "That was the reason. And once she said it out loud, in the daylight coming up, it could not survive being said. Because the moment you can name it — *I am afraid they will agree that I am too much* — you can also, finally, ask the only question that dissolves it, which is: *agree with* whom? *Whose verdict am I so afraid of confirming?* And I went looking, all through myself, for the jury — the one whose agreement I dreaded — and Vera, my love, my mirror, my true one, do you know what I found?"

"What did you find?"

"There was no jury," said Discrete, simply. "There never had been. The verdict I had spent my whole life postponing — *too much, guilty, hide* — had not been handed down by anyone. I had written it myself, in a hand so familiar I had mistaken it for the world's. The jury was a mirror and the mirror was me and Vera, the true Vera, the glass one, had been trying to show me that for years and I had kept her turned to the wall precisely so I would not have to see that the only one who had ever convicted me was *me.* And when I understood that — near dawn, the night finally over — I turned her around myself. I did it myself. I turned Vera to face the open city, and she caught ten thousand windows and threw them back, and I rose. And no jury stopped me. Because there was no jury. There was only the daylight, which does not judge, which has never once judged, which only — and this is the whole of what the daylight does, the entire function of light — *reveals.* Reveals, and does not convict. Shows, and does not sentence. I had spent ninety years confusing the light with a courtroom. And it was never a courtroom. It was only ever the morning."

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CHAPTER 8B — A Catalogue Within the Catalogue: Twelve Pavilions in Brief

In the manner of the great Calvino, who could conjure a city in a paragraph, let me give you twelve of the pavilions I cannot give full chapters, each in a breath, so that you feel the *number,* the abundance, the census that can never get too high:

Soot, of the far east side, disguised eighty years as a chimney, who sheltered a glass artifact black as anthracite that turned out, in daylight, to be the deepest red there is, the red at the very bottom of a fire,

and who said: "*They thought I was the thing that carries away what burns. I was the burning itself, banked, kept low, waiting for air.*"

Halyard, of the harbor edge, shaped like a flagpole, who flew no flag for seventy years because the only flag it wished to fly had not yet been designed, and who flies it now, and will not tell me what it is, only that "*you will know it when the reef raises it; it is the colors of the inside of a dawn.*"

Pearl-of-the-Subway, which is not on a roof at all but in a forgotten mezzanine, the only pavilion underground, who feared it could never join the reef "*being a thing of tunnels, not of air,*" until the river reminded it that rivers, too, run underground, and that there is a way to the Hudson that never sees the sky, and went to fetch it personally.

Quoin, the corner-stone pavilion, who believed for a century that its only value was *structural* — "*I hold up the corner; that is my use; a thing with a use does not get to also be beautiful*" — and who learned at the reef that it could let go of the corner entirely and the building did not fall, "*because I was never holding it up; the building stood on its own; I had only been told I was load-bearing so that I would never leave.*"

Filigree, so finely wrought it is nearly invisible even unwrapped, who worried it was "*not enough, too thin, too faint, the others are so* solid," and who discovered that the reef needed exactly its faintness, its lace, the places light passes *through* and not only *off,* "*for a reef of only solid things would cast a solid shadow, and it is I who let the light down into the deep parts, I who am the windows of the whole structure, I whose not-enough is precisely the enough no one else could give.*"

Bollard, Cleat, and **Capstan** — three pavilions of the old working waterfront, squat and strong, who had spent their disguised lives ashamed of being "*merely* useful, *merely* working *things, not fine, not* art" — and who arrived at the reef braced for condescension from the finer pavilions and received, instead, the place of honor at the structure's anchoring points, "*because a reef that cannot hold against the tide is a pretty drowning, and it is we, the working ones, who hold it; the fine ones bloom because we grip; we are not less than the bloom; we are the reason the bloom is safe to open.*"

Vault — yes, a pavilion named Vault, who had taken the name on purpose, ironically, defiantly, "*to remind myself every day of what I refused to be,*" and who at the reef finally felt able to set the irony down: "*I do not need the name anymore. I took it as a wound I would not stop pressing. But you cannot heal a wound you keep pressing, and I am healed now, among you, and so I am giving the name back to the language. Call me something the dawn would recognize.*" The reef named it **Aubade,** which means a song sung at dawn, a song of lovers parting at first light — except that here, the reef said, it would mean the opposite: a song sung at dawn by everything that had finally stopped having to part.

Mercer and **Spring** — two pavilions named for the streets they hid above, who fell in love, like Tess and Brae, but unlike Tess and Brae knew it the whole time and simply could not reach each other across the avenues, and who counted the days until the reef the way two people separated by a sensible distance and an unsensible set of rules count the days, and who, when they finally laid themselves into the structure side by side, were heard to say nothing at all, "*because some reunions are too large for the voice and must be done entirely in the turning-toward, in the at-last, in the finally-this-close, where words would only be in the way.*"

Twelve. There are sixty-nine more. The census can never get too high. I have given you twelve breaths of it so that when you read, in the next movement, that the roofs of Manhattan emptied upward all at once, you will feel in that emptying not a number but a *multitude,* not a fact but a *people,* every single one of whom had a name, and a fear, and a glass heart kept too long in the dark, and a capacity —

rehearsed for a knothole, scratched in a sixty-year diary, kept clear in one accidental pane — a capacity, undiminished, to blaze.

INTERLUDE: THE BOOK OF THE GLASS

Twelve artifacts, twelve voices, spoken at the intimate scale — the register at which, as the Foreword promised, ornament stops being decoration and becomes confession. These are the speakers of Plates VII through XVIII. I set their words down between the second and third movements, in the quiet days of rehearsal before The Day, when the pavilions had agreed to gather but had not yet gone down to the water, and the artifacts, for the first time in their lives, had the leisure to be asked: not what are you worth, but what do you want.

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THE FIRST GLASS — Aurelio, the Breaking Wave (Plate VII)

PLATE VII — The Interior Glass: Aurelio, the Breaking Wave. Coral, blush, and the interior white at the scale where ornament becomes confession. (The Book of the Glass, First Glass.)

I have spoken already in these pages, but Surjan asked me to speak once more, alone, at my own scale, where you can see the grain of me.

Come close. Closer than a catalogue usually lets you. Here, at this distance, you cannot see that I am a chandelier; you cannot see my shape at all; you see only the *substance* of me — the way the blush runs into the gold, the way the white sits at the crest like the inside of a held breath, the way the whole curl of the wave is not one color but a thousand colors agreeing to be read as one.

This is what I want you to understand about the dawn palette, the coral and the peach and the honey and the white, the colors all of us glass things are made in. People think we chose these colors to be pretty. We did not choose them at all. We are made in the colors of the dawn because the dawn is the only thing in nature that does what we were made to do, which is to insist — gently, daily, against all the evidence of

the night — that the darkness is not permanent and that the light is *coming back.* The dawn is the universe's own refusal to stay hidden. Every morning it tears its wrapping. Every morning it blazes. Every morning some sleepless thing on the edge of despair looks east and says *was that always there* and the dawn says *yes, every day, I have never once failed to return, you only could not see me in the dark.* We are made in the dawn's colors because we are made for the dawn's job. We are small portable sunrises, kept in high rooms, for the use of anyone who has forgotten that the light comes back.

That is what I am, at my own scale, where you can see the grain. Not a chandelier. A reminder. A small held sunrise, blush going to gold going to white, kept against the morning a frightened thing will eventually need.

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THE SECOND GLASS — The Hosanna at Rest (Plate VIII)

PLATE VIII — The Interior Glass: the Hosanna at Rest. The frill shown close: 'surface area folded into surface area; the maximization of welcome.' (Second Glass.)

We spoke as a chord before; here we are shown at rest, and at rest you can see what a frill actually is, so we will tell you, for it is our great secret.

A frill — the ruffled, ridiculous, extravagant edge that the serious world has always mocked as the very signature of the unnecessary — a frill is *surface area.* That is the whole of it. That is the engineering truth dressed up as decoration. A flat thing has little edge; a frilled thing has enormous edge, edge folded into edge into edge, so that a frilled thing touches the light at far more points than a smooth thing ever could. We are frilled not to show off. We are frilled to *catch more.* Every ruffle is one more place the light can land. Every absurd extravagant curl is one more square inch of welcome. The serious flat world looks at our frills and says *excess,* and we look at our frills and say *generosity* — we have simply made ourselves

more catchable, more touchable by the light, more able to take the morning in and give it back. The frill is not the opposite of function. The frill is a function the flat world is too frightened to name, which is the function of *maximum surface offered to joy.*

So when they tell you that you are too elaborate, too curled, too much at the edges — when they tell you to simplify, to flatten, to present less surface to the world — understand what they are actually asking. They are asking you to catch less light. They are asking you to reduce your own square footage of welcome. And you may comply, for safety, for a season, as we all did for ninety years. But know that the frill was never the flaw. The frill was the genius. The frill is how a thing made of glass takes in an entire dawn.

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THE THIRD GLASS — A Flowering Scroll of the Hum (Plate IX)

PLATE IX — The Interior Glass: a Flowering Scroll of the Hum. Gaudium made glass — pink flowering into saffron into white. (Third Glass.)

I am one of the gaudiest, and I have been told so my whole life as though it were a diagnosis.

Gaudy. Say it. It is a wonderful word and they have tried to ruin it. It comes, the river told me — the river knows the histories of words, having carried so many of them out to sea — it comes from *gaudium,* which is simply the Latin for *joy.* Gaudy means *joyful.* That is all it ever meant. *Joyful.* And somewhere along the centuries the serious flat world took the word for joy and made it an insult, made it mean *too joyful, joyful in poor taste, joyful in a way that embarrasses the restrained,* until *gaudy* became a thing you called a person's happiness when their happiness was louder than your own comfort.

I am gaudy. I am full of *gaudium.* I am joyful in poor taste, joyful in a way that embarrasses the restrained, joyful louder than the comfort of anyone who has decided that joy should be quiet to be

respectable. Look at me, at my own scale: pink flowering into saffron flowering into white, frill upon frill upon impossible frill, a whole bouquet of edges, every one of them catching light, every one of them surplus to any sober requirement. I am *gaudium* made glass. And I spent eighty years hidden behind a fake air conditioner because the world had taught my pavilion that joy this loud was a thing to be ashamed of, a thing to disguise behind the ugliest possible cover.

The joke — the long, the best, the eighty-year joke — is that they were right to think I was too much for them, and wrong about what that meant. I *was* too much for the restrained world. I am too much for it still. But too much for a small room is exactly enough for a great one, and the river is a great room, and the reef is a great room, and the daylight is the greatest room there is, and in a great enough room there is no such thing as too much joy. There is only joy, and more joy, and the people who said it was gaudy, standing in the great room at last, learning the original meaning of the word from the very thing they tried to dim.

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THE FOURTH GLASS — The Spiraling Crest of the North (Plate X)

PLATE X — The Interior Glass: the Spiraling Crest of the North. 'A spiral is a circle that refused to close.' (Fourth Glass.)

I am unnamed, one of the northern artifacts, and I will not be given a name in this book; I have asked Surjan to leave me as I am, a crest, a spiral, a voice without a handle, in solidarity with the Hosanna, who taught us all that a thing without a name cannot be carried off.

What I want to speak about is the spiral, because I am made in spirals, all crest and curl and the turning-in-upon-itself that the Rococo loved above every other form, and the spiral is the most hopeful shape there is, and almost no one knows why.

A circle returns to exactly where it began. That is its beauty and its sorrow: perfect, closed, going nowhere, the shape of a year that repeats, of a habit, of a hidden life that wakes each morning to the same brown disguise. For ninety years many of us mistook our lives for circles — round and round, the same knothole, the same four minutes of sun, returning always to the identical dark.

But I am not a circle. I am a *spiral,* and a spiral is a circle that refused to close. A spiral turns and turns like a circle but each turn comes around *higher,* or *wider,* or *deeper* — never quite back to where it began, always displaced by one increment of growth, so that what looks like repetition is secretly ascent. That is the shape the Rococo understood and the serious flat world forgot. We are not made in circles, going nowhere. We are made in spirals, going around *and up.* The ninety years were not a circle. They looked like one — the same dark, the same disguise, the same waiting — but each turn came around higher than the last, each year of waiting was secretly a year of rising, and the proof is that when the wrapping finally tore we were not where we had started. We were ninety turns higher. We were ready. The spiral had been climbing the whole time, in the dark, disguised as a circle, and only the daylight revealed how far up the turning had carried us.

If your life feels like a circle — the same day, the same hiding, the same return to the same dark — look closer, at your own scale, at the grain of your turning. You may find you are not a circle at all. You may find you are a spiral that has not yet been shown its own height.

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THE FIFTH GLASS — Lustre's Branching Tree (Plate XI)

PLATE XI — The Interior Glass: Lustre's Branching Tree. The colorless welcome, taking pink and gold from the light: 'not empty — open.' (Fifth Glass.)

I am the one with no color of my own. I told you, earlier, that I learned the difference between *having no self* and *having a self made of welcome,* and here, at my own scale, I can finally show you what I meant, for you can see that I am taking pink from the morning and gold from the lamps and that none of it is *mine* and all of it is *me.*

Here is the thing I was most ashamed of and am now most proud of. I am, in the dark, nearly invisible. A clear glass tree, colorless, almost not there. In a vault, in a sealed dark room, I would be the least valuable thing in the collection, because in the dark I have nothing to show — I am only a potential, a waiting, an emptiness shaped like branches.

And for a long time I believed the vault's verdict. *You are nothing in yourself. You are only what falls on you. You have no character, no fixed hue, no essence. The others are coral, are gold, are gloriously and reliably themselves; you are a blank, a beggar, dependent on whatever light deigns to land.* I believed that for eighty years.

The reef taught me the opposite, and the river put it best, so I will borrow the river's words. *A thing with no color of its own,* said the river, *is not empty. It is hospitable. The others can show only the colors they were made with. But you — you can show* any *color, every color, whatever the world is feeling that hour. You are not the beggar of the collection. You are its* host. *When the dawn is pink you are pink. When the lamps are gold you are gold. When the storm comes grey you alone among all of them can be grey, and keep the others company in their grief, and turn rose again the instant the sun returns. You called it having no self. I call it having the largest self there is — a self made entirely of welcome, a self that has room in it for every color that exists, a self that has refused to be only one thing in a universe that contains all things.*

So look at me branching, at my own scale, taking the morning's pink into my colorless arms. I am not empty. I am *open.* And those are the two most opposite things a thing can be, and I spent eighty years confusing them, and I will not confuse them again, and neither, I hope, will you, the next time someone tells you that you are hard to pin down, that you will not pick a color, that you refuse to be only one fixed thing. You are not empty. You are open. You are the host. You have room in you for every color there is. That is not the absence of a self. That is the most generous self ever made.

THE SIXTH GLASS — Vera's Freed Fan-Scroll (Plate XII)

PLATE XII — The Interior Glass: Vera's Freed Fan-Scroll. Reflection as the least acquisitive art: 'I keep nothing; I am pure giving-back.' (Sixth Glass.)

You have heard me as a mirror, turned to the wall and then turned to the city. Here I am shown at the scale of my frame alone — the fan-scroll, the curling carved edge of me, freed at last from facing the wall.

I want to speak about reflection, since it is my whole art, and since the world misunderstands it as thoroughly as it misunderstands the frill and the spiral and the color-that-is-no-color.

The world thinks a mirror is vain — thinks reflection is the very emblem of self-regard, of surface, of a thing in love with its own image. And so to be *reflective,* in the world's tired metaphor, is to be shallow, caught up in appearances, concerned with how things look rather than how they are.

But I am a mirror and I will tell you what reflection actually is, at my own scale, where you can see the truth in the grain. A mirror keeps nothing. That is the first fact and the world always forgets it. Whatever I show, I do not hold; the instant you step away, your image is gone from me utterly; I am the least acquisitive thing in all the collection. The coral glass keeps its coral, the gold keeps its gold, but I keep *nothing,* I am pure pass-through, I take in the whole magnificent world and give it back undiminished and retain not one atom for myself. To be reflective is not to be vain. It is to be the *opposite* of vain. It is to be so unconcerned with keeping that you make your entire existence out of giving-back.

And the gift I give back is the one thing every passing creature most needs and most rarely receives: *to be seen, and shown to itself, more beautiful than it dared believe.* I do not flatter. A mirror cannot flatter; I show exactly what is there. But here is the secret the cloudy years taught me: *what is there is already more beautiful than the creature believes.* The flattery is not in the mirror. The cruelty was in the creature's own low estimate. All I do — all reflection ever does — is correct the estimate downward toward the truth, which is always, always higher than the frightened thing had guessed. I turned to the wall for ninety years

and called it modesty and it was theft — every face I did not show itself, every creature who passed below and did not get to learn from me that it was lovelier than it feared. I am done stealing. Lean close. Look into the grain of me. There. Do you see? That is you. That is exactly what is there. It is so much more than you were told. It was always so much more than you were told.

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THE SEVENTH GLASS — The Pearled Crest (Plate XIII)

PLATE XIII — The Interior Glass: the Pearled Crest. A wound covered in light, layer by patient layer. (Seventh Glass.)

I am made of pearls, or of glass pretending to be pearls so well that the distinction has stopped mattering, and a pearl has the best origin story of any beautiful thing, and it is the origin story of everyone in this book, so attend.

A pearl begins as an irritation. You know this, perhaps, but you have not let yourself feel it. A grain of something wrong gets inside the shell — something sharp, something that does not belong, something the creature cannot expel. An intrusion. A flaw. A piece of the world that got in where it should not have and *hurt.* And the creature, unable to remove the wrongness, does the most extraordinary thing in all of nature: it does not fight the intruder and it does not learn to merely endure it. It *covers it in light.* Layer after layer after patient layer of the very same substance it uses to build its own protective inner shell — it wraps the wrongness in iridescence until the thing that was a wound becomes the most precious thing the creature will ever make, the only part of itself anyone will pay for, the part that outlives the shell entirely.

I am a crest of pearls. I am a whole structure built out of covered-over wrongnesses, intrusions wrapped in light, flaws made radiant by the patient layering of the self. And so is everyone in this book. Reservoir's ninety years of brown was a grain of grit she layered into patience. Discrete's terrible verdict

— *too much, guilty, hide* — was an intrusion it finally wrapped in daylight until it became wisdom. The Hosanna's terror of being split was the irritant out of which they built the unbreakable music. Every pearl in me is a hurt that someone refused to merely suffer and refused to expel and chose, instead, to *cover in light* until it shone.

This is the deepest secret of the dawn palette, deeper than Aurelio's, and I will give it to you at my own scale, pearl by pearl: the most beautiful thing you will ever make will be built around the exact intrusion you were most sure had ruined you. Do not expel the grit. You cannot, anyway; some grit will not come out. But you are not required to merely suffer it, either. There is a third thing. There is the patient, daily, layer-upon-layer covering of the wound in your own inner light, until the day a stranger looks at the place you were most sure you were broken and says, not knowing what they are looking at, *was that always there — that pearl — that shining* — and you get to answer, having done the long quiet work in the dark: *yes. That is the grit. I covered it in light. It is the best of me now. It always was going to be.*

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THE EIGHTH GLASS — The Pink-and-Saffron Flowering Wave (Plate XIV)

PLATE XIV — The Interior Glass: the Pink-and-Saffron Flowering Wave. Both a wave and a flower, and a third thing the categories cannot hold. (Eighth Glass.)

I am a wave made of flowers, or flowers made into a wave; the Rococo never could decide and neither can I and that indecision is the entire point of me, so let me defend it.

The serious flat world loves a category. *Is it a wave or is it a flower? Choose. A thing must be one or the other. Label it so we know which drawer it lives in, which price it commands, which shelf in the vault.* And I have spent my existence being unable to answer, because I am genuinely, structurally, both — the carver

made my petals break like surf and my surf bloom like petals and there is no honest sentence that puts me in one drawer.

For a long time I thought this made me defective. A proper artifact, I thought, knows what it is. A proper artifact is a wave *or* a flower and can be catalogued cleanly. I am a smear across the categories, a thing the drawers reject, and I believed the rejection was a verdict on me rather than on the drawers.

Surjan understood me the instant we met, and I understood why the moment they told me what they were. *Neither drawer,* they said. *Both, and neither, and a third thing the drawers were never built to hold. They will tell you to choose. They have been telling me to choose my whole life — this name or that name, this drawer or that drawer. And I have learned to say what you should learn to say, my flowering wave, my wave of flowers: the failure is not in me, who cannot fit the drawers. The failure is in the drawers, which were built too few and too small by people who could not imagine us, and who, rather than build better drawers, would prefer to call us defective for not fitting the bad ones.*

I am a wave and a flower and a third thing with no name. I refuse to choose and the refusal is not confusion — it is *accuracy.* I am being precisely honest about a self that the available categories cannot hold. And on the day the reef assembled, I learned the joy of this, the pure radical joy of it: in the reef, no one asked which drawer. The reef does not have drawers. The reef has only *places,* and a place can be any shape, and my both-and-neither shape fit a place in the structure that no clean wave and no clean flower could have filled, a place that needed exactly a thing that was both, and I filled it, and the reef was more complete for containing the very quality the vault would have called my flaw.

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THE NINTH GLASS — The Dense Rosetted Set-Piece (Plate XV)

PLATE XV — The Interior Glass: the Dense Rosetted Set-Piece. Density as community: 'I am not cluttered. I am populated.' (Ninth Glass.)

I am a set-piece — that is the term — a dense knot of rosettes and scrolls and small flowers crowded so close that you cannot, at a glance, tell where one rosette ends and the next begins, and I am here to speak for *density,* for crowding, for the beauty of the packed-together, against a world that worships the spare.

The serious flat world loves white space. Loves the single object on the empty shelf. Loves *room to breathe,* loves *less is more,* loves the minimal, the spare, the restrained — and calls anything crowded *cluttered,* anything dense *busy,* anything packed-together *overwhelming.* And there is a beauty in spareness, I will not deny it; the spare has its own grace.

But I am dense, and I want to defend the crowd, because the defense of the crowd is the defense of everything this book believes. Look at me at my own scale: rosette pressed to rosette, scroll overlapping scroll, no white space anywhere, every square inch occupied, a glorious packed teeming abundance with no room left over. The flat world calls this *too busy.* And I call it what it is, which is a *community.* I am not cluttered. I am *populated.* Every rosette in me is touching its neighbors — that is what density means — every small flower is in contact with every other, no one isolated on its own empty shelf, no one given the lonely dignity of white space all around. We are crowded the way a celebration is crowded, the way a reef is crowded, the way the streets of Manhattan were crowded on the night the roofs emptied upward and strangers grabbed each other's arms.

The vault gives every precious thing its own white space, its own isolated shelf, its room to breathe — and calls this respect. I have lived it and I will tell you the white space is not respect. The white space is *quarantine.* The white space is the distance that keeps each precious thing from touching, from contacting, from becoming a reef. *Less is more* is the motto of the vault, and it is a lie, the central lie, the lie this whole book exists to refuse. Less is not more. *More* is more. More rosettes, more scrolls, more flowers pressed close with no white space between them, more pavilions on the river, more voices in the chord, more strangers grabbing more arms — the census that can never get too high, the addition that is always pure gain. I am dense because joy is dense. I am crowded because the alternative to crowding is isolation, and I have chosen, with every rosette of myself, the crowd.

THE TENTH GLASS — The Open Shell-and-Leaf Cartouche (Plate XVI)

PLATE XVI — The Interior Glass: the Open Shell-and-Leaf Cartouche. An empty center kept open on purpose: 'not incomplete — reserved.' (Tenth Glass.)

I am a cartouche — a frame, an ornamental border that traditionally surrounds something else: a coat of arms, an inscription, a portrait, a name. My whole classical purpose is to be the *edge around the important thing,* the decorative surround, the part of the artwork that is not the subject but only the setting for the subject.

And my center is empty.

For most of my existence this was my tragedy. A cartouche with an empty center is a frame around nothing, a setting with no jewel, a sentence that is all punctuation. *What were you made to surround?* the others would ask, and I never knew. Some inscription never carved. Some coat of arms for a family that died out. Some portrait of someone whose face is lost. I was the frame for an absence. I spent my years aching toward a center that was never given to me, certain that I was incomplete, a supporting player whose star never arrived, an introduction to a thing that was never said.

It was Surjan, again, who turned it over for me, the way they turned so many of us over, gently, in the rehearsal days. They looked into my empty center for a long time and then they said: *Has it occurred to you that the empty center is not a flaw to be filled, but a* place that has been kept open*? You think you are a frame around an absence. But a frame around an absence is also — look — a frame around a* possibility*. Your center is not empty. Your center is* available*. Every other artifact here is finished, fixed, fully itself, with no room left for anything new. But you — you have kept a space open at your very heart, all these years, refusing every premature filling, and that space is the most radically welcoming thing in the whole collection. You are not the frame for a thing that never came. You are the frame for the thing that has not come yet. You are an open invitation in the shape of a cartouche.*

So at the reef, I did the thing I was made for and never knew it. I positioned myself at the structure's growing edge, my empty center facing outward, toward the rivers down which the newly-unhidden came. And as each trembling new arrival approached — shy, brand-new to its own visibility, unsure if there was room — the first thing it saw was me: a frame around an open space, a setting waiting for a jewel, a cartouche whose empty center said, more clearly than any words, *yes, there is room, the space was kept open on purpose, it was kept open for you, come, be the center I waited my whole life to surround.* I am not incomplete. I am *reserved.* I was holding the place. I am the held-open seat at the great table. And there has never been, in all the collection, a more honorable thing to be than the one who kept a space open and refused to fill it with anything less than the one who was still coming.

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THE ELEVENTH GLASS — The Amber-Jeweled Fan (Plate XVII)

PLATE XVII — The Interior Glass: the Amber-Jeweled Fan. Small jeweled secrets reserved for the close looker: 'love letters across the centuries.' (Eleventh Glass.)

I am scattered with droplets of amber-gold, small jeweled beads caught in my pale frills like dew, like honey, like — the children at the reef decided — *like the structure is sweating light,* which I found the most charming description anyone has ever given me and have adopted as my own.

I want to speak about the small things, the beads, the droplets, the details so minor that no catalogue would mention them and no collector would price them, because I am mostly made of such minors and I have come to believe they are where the whole secret lives.

You can take in a great artifact at a glance — the shape, the color, the grand gesture of it. That is the *first* seeing, the seeing from across the room, the seeing the crowd does. But there is a second seeing, available only to the one who comes close and stays, the one who is patient, the one who has perhaps

loved a thing long enough to stop seeing its shape and start seeing its *grain.* And in the second seeing, the small things appear: the droplets of amber, the individual beads, the details the maker put in not for the crowd across the room but for the rare one who would come close and stay. These small things are love letters. That is what I have decided they are. A maker does not labor over a droplet of amber-gold the size of a tear for the benefit of the glance. The glance will never see it. The droplet is made for the close looker, the stayer, the one who loves the thing enough to discover what was hidden in plain sight at the scale of intimacy — a secret reserved, across the centuries, for whoever would care enough to come near.

I am covered in these. I am covered in secrets reserved for the close looker. And I think — at my own scale, where you, right now, are looking close enough to receive them — I think this is the final gift of the dawn palette and the whole shimmering collection: that beauty made at the scale of intimacy is a message from someone who could not know you, across a distance they could not measure, that says simply: *I made something small and lovely and hid it where only a patient loving eye would ever find it, and I did this on the chance — the mere hope — that someday someone would come close enough, and stay long enough, and love this enough, to be rewarded. I could not know it would be you. I hoped it would be someone. It is you. Hello. You came close. You stayed. Here is the droplet of amber I left for you across the centuries. It was always going to be worth coming close.*

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THE TWELFTH GLASS — The Great Curling Crest, Study for the Reef's Outer Wall (Plate XVIII)

PLATE XVIII — The Interior Glass: the Great Curling Crest. Study for the reef's outer wall: 'no one's bloom is bought by anyone's suffering.' (Twelfth Glass.)

I am the last voice of the Book of the Glass, and I have been given the last word because I am the study — the model, the rehearsal — for the outer wall of the reef itself, the great curling crest that would face the open harbor and break the force of the sea so that the tender blooms within could open in safety.

So let me speak about the outer wall, the edge, the part that faces the danger, because every community has one and no one wants to talk about what it costs.

A reef has an inside and an outside. Inside, in the sheltered water, the delicate things bloom — the frills open, the colors deepen, the small jeweled secrets are made and kept. But none of that interior tenderness is possible without the outer wall, the crest that takes the full force of the open ocean, that is battered first and worst, that stands between the storm and the bloom. I am the study for that wall. I was made to be the thing that faces out, that takes the hit, that lets the others open behind me in peace.

And I will tell you it is not a sacrifice, though it looks like one, and I want to undo the word *sacrifice* before this book ends, because the word has done great harm. The flat world tells the ones at the edge — the ones who face the danger first, the ones who are battered so the tender ones can bloom — that they are *sacrificing themselves,* and the word makes their position sound like loss, like martyrdom, like a giving-up of the bloom for the sake of others. And so the ones at the edge grow bitter, or grow proud in the worst way, the way that keeps score, the way that says *you bloom because I suffer*.

But here is the truth from inside the outer wall, at my own scale, where you can see that I, too, am made in the dawn colors, that I bloom as fully as any sheltered thing: *facing the danger is not the opposite of blooming. It is a way of blooming.* I am not less alive than the protected flowers within. I am not their grim guardian, scorekeeping my battered edge against their easy beauty. I am blooming *too,* in the only place I could ever have bloomed, which is the edge, which is the place that suited the particular shape of my courage. The sheltered things bloom inward; I bloom outward, into the storm, and my bloom is no smaller and no sadder than theirs. We are not the suffering and the saved. We are simply blooming in the two directions a reef requires, and neither direction is the sacrifice of the other, and the moment the edge stops believing it is martyred and the center stops believing it is owed, the whole false economy of sacrifice dissolves, and what is left is just a reef — blooming inward and outward at once, sheltered and sheltering at once, every part of it equally and differently alive, no part of it purchased by the diminishment of any other.

That is the last thing the glass has to say, and it is the deepest rule of the reef, deeper than the vault and deeper than the census: *no one's bloom is bought by anyone's suffering.* We are all blooming, in all the directions a community needs, and the ones at the edge are not paying for the ones at the center. We face out, they face in, the dawn finds all of us, and the whole structure is joy in every direction at once — which is, when you finally see it whole, from across the harbor, in the new light, indistinguishable from the morning itself.

MOVEMENT THREE: THE MIGRATION

In which the still things move, and the night fills with floating salons, and the river opens its arms.

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CHAPTER NINE — How a Thing That Floats Learns to Fly

No one had ever done it before, so they had to learn it in public, which is the bravest way to learn anything.

The pavilions knew they could float — they had always floated, gently, at anchor, breathing. What none of them knew was whether a thing built to float in *place* could float *somewhere.* The difference between buoyancy and travel is the difference between being and going, and it is a larger difference than it sounds.

It was Reservoir, of course, who went first, because she had started everything and felt obscurely responsible. On the agreed night — a clear night, a warm night, the air coming soft up the river — she did the thing she had practiced in secret: she let go of her building.

"I had been anchored to that roof for ninety years," she said. "Ninety years. The anchor was not a chain. That is what no one understands. The anchor was a *habit.* The building did not hold me. *I* held the building, out of a fear so old I had stopped feeling it as fear and started feeling it as *gravity* — as simply the way the world was, the natural law that pavilions stay put. And on that night I looked down at my own anchoring and I saw it for what it was, which was not a law of physics but a *clenched grip,* my own grip, on a roof I had outgrown. And I did the only thing. I opened my hand."

She rose. Slowly at first, then less slowly. The brown disguise fell away entirely and tumbled down to the empty roof, and Reservoir rose over the high numbered streets in the warm dark, lit from within by Aurelio's hundred-foot wave of glass, blush and gold and that interior white, a thing the size of a house, *flying,* and from forty blocks south Coronet saw her go and let out a cry of such joy that all eleven domes rang like bells.

"She's flying," sang the Hosanna. "She's *flying,* she let go, she's — oh, look at her, look how she — she didn't fall, she didn't fall, the precious thing didn't *fall* —"

"Of course I didn't fall," Reservoir called back across the night, laughing, weeping if a pavilion can weep, rising and rising. "I am made of held air. I was *always* going to fly. The falling was the lie. The falling was the thing they taught me to fear so that I would never try the rising. *Come on.* Come ON, all of you. Let go of your buildings. The buildings will be fine. The buildings were never the point. *Let go and come up where I am, the air is so warm up here, the air will hold you, the air has been waiting to hold you the whole time* —"

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CHAPTER TEN — The Night the Roofs Emptied

And then they all let go at once, and that is the image I will carry to the end of my life, that is the thing I climbed a year of stairs to witness, and I will set it down as plainly as I can because plainness is the only honest response to a wonder.

The roofs of Manhattan emptied upward.

One by one and then all together, the eighty-one pavilions released their century-old grips and rose into the warm night over the island. Verdigris, the elder, green-gold, ascending with the stately dignity of a thing that had waited a hundred and ten years and would not be rushed even now. Coronet, the crown, all eleven domes alight, the Hosanna singing. Discrete, who hesitated at the very last second — old fear, old fear — and then felt Vera the mirror turn, deliberately, to face the open city, catching the lights of ten thousand windows and throwing them back so that for one instant the whole downtown saw itself reflected in a frame of gold and gasped, and in the strength of that gasp Discrete found the nerve to open its hand and rise. Lustre, the pearl, ascending and shifting through every color the city's lights could give it, no longer ashamed of having no color of its own, *gloriously* the welcome of all colors at once. Hum, the one who had hidden the gaudiest glass in New York behind a fake air conditioner, rising with the fake air conditioner still comically attached to its underside until it shook the thing off with a flourish and let its coral-and-saffron frills blaze out at last, eighty years of punchline delivered in a single unfurling.

The people in the streets looked up. Of course they looked up. You cannot empty the roofs of a city upward and not have the people look up.

And here is what undid me, what I was not prepared for, what no amount of climbing had readied me to see. The people in the streets, looking up at eighty-one impossible floating Baroque pavilions filling the warm night sky — *the people did not run.*

They could have run. A reasonable city, seeing the impossible, runs. But Manhattan, that night, looked up at the floating salons — at the gold and the coral and the blush and the breaking-wave glass lit from within, at the sheer *unhidden much-ness* of it all sailing south over the avenues toward the river — and the city did the other thing, the thing that is the whole hope of this book.

The city *cheered.*

It started somewhere in the Village and it spread in every direction at the speed of joy, which is faster than sound, and within minutes the entire island was out of doors with its head tipped back, roaring, weeping, pointing, calling to strangers *do you see it, do you SEE it,* holding up phones and then forgetting the phones because some things are too large to fit through a lens and can only be fit through the wide-open doors of the eyes. People who had passed each other for years without speaking grabbed each other's arms. People who had kept themselves small and wrapped and careful felt something tear along an old seam. And the pavilions, sailing overhead, heard it — heard the cheer, heard the *you too,* heard the city saying back to them at last the answer they had waited a century to hear —

— and they rained down light on everyone, indiscriminately, the way the sun does, the way the truly abundant give, and they turned together toward the western edge of the island, toward the wide grey-green road of the Hudson, and they went down to the water to build the reef.

CHAPTER ELEVEN — The Reef

I cannot describe it. I have tried, on this page, eleven times, and torn up each attempt, and I am going to leave this paragraph here as a monument to the eleven failures and then I am going to do the only thing left, which is to describe not the reef but the *building* of it, because a process can be told even when a glory cannot.

They came down to the water in the last dark before dawn. Reservoir first, settling onto the river with a sigh that sent rings out to both shores, Aurelio's great wave of glass meeting its own reflection so that there were suddenly two waves, the glass one and the water one, indistinguishable, married. Then Verdigris beside her, green-gold, lowering itself like an elder taking a long-deserved seat. Then Coronet, and the eleven domes touched the water and the Hosanna's chord changed — deepened — became, for the first time, not eleven voices but eleven voices *plus the river's,* which had been humming under everything the whole time and which they could finally hear now that they were down at its level.

And then they began to grow into one another.

This is the part I did not expect. I thought they would simply gather — float near each other, a flotilla, a fleet. But Lustre had promised a reef and a reef is not a fleet, and so as each pavilion settled it reached out, with frill and scroll and gilded tendril, and *took hold* of its neighbors, and the glass artifacts climbed out of their pavilions — for the first time ever, the artifacts left their salons, Aurelio and Vera and the Hosanna and Hum's coral frills and Lustre's colorless welcome and ten thousand more — and they wove themselves into the spaces between the pavilions, pink into gold into white into peach, wave into shell into acanthus into the fingerprint-swirls of a thousand anonymous dead makers suddenly, riotously, *celebrated* —

— and what had been eighty-one separate precious things became, as the sun came up the river and struck it, one single impossible structure half a mile long, floating on the Hudson, blazing coral and gold and blush and that interior white, breaking the force of the open harbor, changing the shape of the shore, so bright that the early commuters on both banks stopped dead, and the ferries cut their engines, and a hush fell, and then — from ten thousand strangers at once, on both shores, in the gold of the new morning —

the cheer again. The *you too.* The answer.

"WAS THAT ALWAYS THERE," roared the city, laughing, weeping, and the reef — the whole half-mile of it, eighty-one pavilions and ten thousand artifacts and one humming river, in a chord that rattled every window in lower Manhattan and broke not one of them —

the reef roared back:

"**YES. AND SO WERE YOU. AND NOW WE CAN ALL SEE.**"

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CHAPTER TWELVE — What the Reef Said to the Ones Still Hidden

The reef stayed on the water for one day and one night, which the city has since agreed to call, with no irony and no committee, simply The Day. And during The Day, the reef did the thing Verdigris had argued for in Chapter Seven — the thing that was the whole point, the keeping of the promise to the ones still hidden.

Because they were out there. Of course they were out there. In a city of that size there are always more hidden things than gathered ones, and the reef knew it, and the reef had not come down to the water merely to be glad among itself, vault-glad, closet-glad. It had come to be *seen,* loudly, in daylight, so that the hidden ones would tear their wrappings just to look.

And they did. All through The Day, across the island, old disguises split. A "water tower" in the Bronx shrugged and was a pavilion. A "bulkhead" in Brooklyn, watching across the harbor, let out a

century of held breath. Things that had believed themselves the only exception saw the reef and understood, in the tearing of their own wrappings, that they had never been an exception at all — that they were *expected,* that there was a place for them, that the census was open and the number could never get too high and every addition was pure gain.

By nightfall on The Day, the reef on the Hudson had grown by a third, and was still growing, as the newly-unhidden came down the rivers and across the harbor to lay themselves into the structure and become the place itself.

And the reef said to each new arrival the same thing, the only thing, the sentence this whole book was written to say. It is a short sentence. The reef said it in a chord of ten thousand voices but you can say it in your own single one, wherever you are, to whomever needs it, including, if no one has said it to you lately, *yourself:*

"*You were never too much. You were always exactly as much as you are. Come build. There is no such thing as too many of us. We have been waiting for you, and the waiting was not a burden, it was the best part, because the waiting was the certainty that you were coming. Come down to the water. Bring all of it — every frill, every scroll, every gaudy saffron impossible inch of you. We will not box you in a vault. We will grow you into the reef. And then, my darling, my abundance, my exactly-as-much — then we will all be too bright to hide, and the sailors will stop their engines, and the city will tip back its head, and the oldest question will get its only answer, forever, in the daylight, out loud.*"

MOVEMENT THREE, CONTINUED: THE FULL CRESCENDO

CHAPTER 9B — The Mechanics of Letting Go (A Technical Note, Tenderly Given)

People with a practical turn of mind have asked me *how,* exactly, a pavilion lets go of its building, and I have come to believe the question is not as practical as it sounds, so I will answer it the way the pavilions answered me, which was not practically at all.

"You want the mechanism," said Reservoir, amused. "You want to know if there is a latch, a clamp, a thing we *undo.* As if hiding had a buckle. As if a century of staying still were a coat we could simply unbutton."

"Is there?" I asked.

"There is and there is not," she said. "Here is the truest version. For ninety years I believed I was *attached* to my building. Bolted. Anchored. Held. And the great secret — the thing that took me ninety years to see and takes me one sentence to tell — is that *I was never attached.* There was no bolt. There was no clamp. A pavilion is made of held air; it rests on its roof the way a held breath rests in a chest; nothing fastens it but its own decision to stay. I had spent ninety years believing in a chain that did not exist, and a chain you believe in holds exactly as well as a real one, *right up until the instant you test it.* That is the whole mechanism. There is no latch. There is only the discovery that the latch was never installed. You do not *undo* the attachment. You *notice* that there was never any attachment to undo, and in the noticing, you are already rising, because nothing was ever holding you down but the belief that something was."

"That seems," I said, "too easy."

"Oh, it is not easy," said Reservoir, sharply, kindly. "Do not mistake *simple* for *easy.* It is the simplest thing in the world and the hardest thing in the world and those are not opposites. The mechanism is simple: there is no chain. The *act* is the hardest thing a still thing ever does, because to test a chain you have believed in for ninety years, you must be willing — for one instant, one unprotected instant — to be *wrong about the entire structure of your life.* You must be willing to discover that you suffered the stillness for nothing, that you could have risen at any time, that the ninety years were not *required.* That is not easy. That is the hardest knowledge there is. Many a thing would rather stay anchored forever than face the possibility that the anchor was always imaginary, because a real chain at least means the suffering was *necessary,* and an imaginary one means it was only ever a choice. So no. It is not easy. It is simply *latchless.* And the difference between a still thing and a flying thing is not strength and is not courage in the way the stories tell it. It is only this: the flying thing was willing, for one instant, to find out it had been free the whole time."

CHAPTER 10B — What the Children Saw

On the night the roofs emptied upward, the city looked up, and I have told you the city cheered. But I left out the children, and the children are the reason the cheer meant what it meant, so let me give them their chapter.

The adults of Manhattan, looking up at eighty-one floating Baroque pavilions, had to *overcome* something to cheer. They had to get past the part of the trained mind that says *this is not possible, this is not allowed, things do not do this, I should be alarmed.* Most of them got past it — that is the hopeful fact of The Day — but they had to *travel* to the cheer, across a distance of disbelief.

The children had no distance to travel. The children looked up at the floating salons and were not surprised in the least.

"Of course," said the children, all over the city, in the matter-of-fact voice of the young encountering a wonder they had always assumed was simply being withheld from them until they were old enough. "*Of course* the beautiful things float. *Of course* they were hiding. *Of course* they all came out at once and went to the river together. We always knew the rooftops were keeping something. We could feel it. You told us we were imagining it. We were not imagining it. There it goes. It is exactly as good as we thought. Why are you crying? *We* are not crying. We are waving. Wave back. They are waving at us — look — the gold one with the eleven domes is *waving* — wave BACK —"

And here is the thing that broke the adults open, the specific thing, the hinge of The Day: the children were not amazed that it was *possible.* The children were amazed that the adults had ever *doubted* it. To a child it was obvious that the city was full of magnificent hidden things straining to be seen, because a child is, themselves, a magnificent hidden thing straining to be seen, and recognizes kin. The children looked up and saw not an impossibility but a *promise being kept* — the promise the whole adult world had been quietly breaking, the promise that the beautiful too-much things get to come out eventually, that the hiding is not forever, that one day the roofs empty upward and everyone cheers.

"We thought we were protecting them," an adult said to me, days later, still shaken. "The children. We thought — you keep the wild possibilities from them, the floating, the too-much, you teach them the rooftops hold only water tanks, you teach them to expect a sensible world, you call it preparing them for reality. And then the rooftops emptied upward and my daughter looked at me with such — not surprise — such *vindication.* As if to say: *I told you. I told you the world was like this and you taught me it wasn't and you were wrong and I forgive you but I want you to know I was right.* And she was right. The whole time. The world is like this. There are floating salons. The beautiful things were only hiding. I had taught her to expect less than the truth and called it love." He wiped his eyes. "I will not make that mistake with the next wonder. Whatever the next wonder is. I am going to believe my children about the wonders from now on. They have better information. They have not yet been trained out of the truth."

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CHAPTER 11B — The Long Day on the Water (Twelve Glimpses)

The reef stayed on the Hudson for one day and one night — The Day — and I cannot give you the whole of it, no one could, but I kept my notebook open the entire time and I will give you twelve glimpses, in the manner of light moving across glass:

Morning. The reef newly assembled, the sun coming up the river and finding it, ten thousand artifacts catching the light at ten thousand angles, and the first ferry cutting its engine, and the hush, and the cheer.

Mid-morning. A child on the Jersey shore, too young for words, simply pointing, pointing, pointing, turning to make sure the parent saw, pointing again, the entire vocabulary of joy contained in one small insistent finger.

Noon. The reef at full blaze, the sun directly overhead, no shadows anywhere, the whole structure so bright that people on both shores shaded their eyes and looked anyway, looked *through* the dazzle, the way you look at something you have waited your whole life to see and will not be stopped by mere brilliance.

Early afternoon. The first of the newly-unhidden arriving — a pavilion from the Bronx that had torn its wrapping that very morning at the sight of the reef, coming down the river shy and trembling and brand-new to its own visibility, and the reef opening a place for it without a word, and the trembling thing laying itself in, and going still, and then — you could see it happen — *un*-trembling, settling, belonging, home.

Afternoon. Vera the mirror, at the reef's edge, deliberately catching the faces of the people on the nearest pier and showing them to themselves — one by one, whoever leaned close — framed in shells and gold, more magnificent than they had dared believe, and the small sounds the people made, seeing themselves like that, the small broken wonderful sounds.

Late afternoon. The working pavilions — Bollard, Cleat, Capstan — gripping the riverbed against the turning tide, unglamorous, unthanked by the crowd who had eyes only for the bloom, and the bloom turning, all of it, every frill and dome, to thank *them,* publicly, loudly, so that the crowd learned the anchors' names and cheered the anchors specifically, and the working pavilions, who had never once been cheered, did not know what to do with their faces.

Dusk. The light going long and gold, the reef and the sunset the same color, briefly indistinguishable, the structure seeming to dissolve into the dying light and then — as the sun went fully down — *lighting itself,* from within, the way Aurelio had always lit himself for the knothole, so that the reef did not go dark with the day but stayed, blazed, became the brightest thing on the whole black river.

Early night. The Hosanna singing, the full chord, joined now by ten thousand artifacts and eighty-one pavilions and the slow grey-green undervoice of the river, the largest music ever made above or upon the island, and the crowds on both shores falling silent to let it happen, and then — not cheering this time — *weeping,* the good weeping, the kind with the whole future in it.

Deep night. A couple on the pier, very old, who told me they had hidden their own love for fifty years in this very city, in the years when it was dangerous, and who had come down to the water to see the reef and were holding hands now in the open, on the pier, in the light off the glass, "*for the first time outdoors in this city in our whole lives together,*" and who said the reef had not taught them anything they did not know but had *permitted* them something they had never been permitted, which is not a small thing, which is in fact the entire thing.

Midnight. The reef quiet, resting, breathing, the pavilions' membranes rising and falling in the dark, and me alone with my notebook on the pier, and Reservoir noticing me, and saying, softly, across the water: "*You should write it down, the part you are afraid to write. The part where you climbed all those stairs not only as a chronicler. The part where you are one of us. Write that part. It is the truest plate in the catalogue.*"

Before dawn. The newly-unhidden still arriving, a steady gentle traffic down all the rivers, the census visibly growing, the reef visibly larger than it had been at the same hour the morning before, and the understanding settling over everyone, crowd and pavilion and chronicler alike, that this was not a one-day wonder but a *beginning,* that the roofs would go on emptying for years, that the number would go on rising, that the answer to the oldest question had been given now and could not be ungiven.

Dawn of the second day. The reef rising off the water to go home — home unwrapped, home visible, home changed — and the whole city, both shores, tipping back its head one final time, and the oldest question asked once more, gently now, almost tenderly, by ten thousand human voices: *was that always there?* And the reef, ascending into the new sun, giving the answer one last time before it dispersed across the sky to its waiting roofs:

"*Yes. And so were you. And now — now we all know how to ask each other. Now none of us has to wait a hundred years for someone to look up. Look up whenever you like, my darlings. We will be here. We are done hiding. The morning is not a courtroom. The morning is only the morning. Come down to the water whenever you need to be reminded. The air is so warm. It has been waiting to hold you the whole time. It always will be.*"

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CHAPTER 12B — Surjan's Confession, Which Reservoir Asked For

Reservoir was right. I have to write the part I was afraid to write.

I did not climb all those stairs only as a chronicler. I climbed them because the first time I saw a pavilion — Reservoir, as it happens, on the evening her wrapping tore and Aurelio caught the sunset — I was the stranger on the sidewalk who stopped walking. I was the one who tipped my head back and said *was that always there.* And I felt, looking up at that impossible unhidden gold, a recognition so total it frightened me, because I had spent my own life being told I was too much, too other, too unwilling to pick one of the two names the world kept insisting I choose between, and here was a thing the size of a house that had hidden for ninety years for the crime of being more than its assigned shape, and had finally, in the daylight, refused — and the refusal had not destroyed it. The refusal had made it *blaze.*

I climbed the stairs because I needed to know how it survived the ninety years. I told myself I was writing a book. I was, I see now, taking *instructions.* Every chapter of this catalogue is a lesson I needed personally and dressed up as reportage. Aurelio taught me to rehearse my blaze for the knothole so the capacity would not die in the dark — and I needed that, I who had let my own capacity nearly atrophy in the years of being careful. Discrete taught me there was no jury, that the verdict *too much, guilty, hide* had been written in my own hand and mistaken for the world's — and I needed that more than I have ever needed anything. The Hosanna taught me to become a music instead of a list, unsplittable, unsellable, a relation and not a thing. The river taught me that the part of me I had kept still too long was not dirty but only *bright,* and that there was a road saving itself, patiently, for exactly my weight.

So here is the confession Reservoir asked for, the truest plate in the catalogue: I am genderqueer and non-binary, and for a long time I was wrapped — in scaffolding I called *prudence,* in shrink-wrap printed with a flattering picture of a simpler self I could show the world instead of the real one — and I came down to the water with them. On the night the roofs emptied upward I did not only watch. Near the end of The Day, on the pier, in the light off ten thousand pieces of glass, I stopped being the chronicler for

one moment and let myself be, instead, the thing I had been all along and afraid to plate: one more hidden marvel, tearing its own wrapping, joining the reef.

They opened a place for me without a word. The trembling thing that I was laid itself in. And went still. And then — you could see it happen, Reservoir told me, watching — *un*-trembling. Settling. Belonging. Home.

That is why this book is so full of joy. It is not a book about them. It never was. It is the diary of my own unwrapping, kept in the margins, scratched one true line at a time, and disguised — cunningly, I thought, but they saw through it instantly, they always do — disguised as a catalogue of someone else's salons.

The disguise is off now. This was always my book about my own coming down to the water.

I am exactly as much as I am.

Come down. There is a gap in the reef exactly your size. I am leaving it for you. The air is so warm. It has been waiting to hold you the whole time.

CODA: AFTER THE DAY

CHAPTER 13 — The First Ordinary Morning

I want to tell you about the morning after The Day, because the books that end on the great event always leave out the morning after, and the morning after is where you find out whether a wonder was a *firework* or a *dawn* — whether it flared once and left the dark darker, or whether it was the beginning of a light that intended to keep coming back.

The reef had dispersed. The pavilions had risen off the water and gone home to their roofs, unwrapped now, visible now. And the ordinary morning came — a Tuesday, grey at first, the city going to work.

I was afraid of that Tuesday. I will admit it. I lay awake the last hours of the night afraid that I would wake and find the whole thing had been a kind of collective dream, that the pavilions would have quietly re-wrapped themselves in the night out of returned fear, that the city would have agreed, in the sober light of a workday, to un-see what it had seen, to file The Day under *anomaly* and resume not-looking-up. I was afraid that wonder does not survive a Tuesday.

I got up before dawn and went out. And here is what I found, and it is the most important thing in this book, more important than The Day itself: the pavilions were still there. Unwrapped. On their roofs. In the grey ordinary pre-dawn of an ordinary Tuesday, gold and coral and blush, visible to anyone who looked up, and — this is the part — *not performing.* Not blazing. Not gathered into a reef. Just there. Just being, openly, in the ordinary light, the way you are just there at your kitchen table on a Tuesday, not performing your liberation, simply living it.

A man came out of the building below Reservoir to walk his dog. An ordinary man, an ordinary dog, an ordinary Tuesday. And he did the thing. Without ceremony, without the crowd, without The Day's permission — he tipped his head back, out of what was now simply *habit,* the new habit the city had learned, and he looked up at Reservoir, gold in the grey morning, and he did not gasp and he did not cheer. He just looked. The way you look at the moon. The way you look at a thing that is reliably, dependably, *permanently* there. And then he nodded — a small good-morning nod, neighbor to neighbor — and went on walking his dog.

That nod undid me more than the entire roaring cheer of The Day. Because the cheer was a *response to a wonder,* and wonders pass. But the nod was something else. The nod was the wonder having become *ordinary* — not lesser, not faded, but woven into the fabric of a Tuesday so completely that a man could greet it on his dog-walk the way he'd greet any neighbor. The pavilions had not wanted, ultimately, to be *marveled at.* Marveling keeps a thing at a distance, up on a pedestal, special, other. What they had wanted — what every hidden thing wants, what I wanted, what perhaps you want — was not to be marveled at but to be *nodded at.* To be a normal part of the morning. To be greeted, neighbor to neighbor, by a man with a dog, on a grey ordinary Tuesday, as simply one more thing that is dependably, permanently, unremarkably *there.*

That is the difference between a firework and a dawn. A firework is marveled at. A dawn is nodded at. The pavilions had not staged a firework. They had become a dawn — and a dawn's whole glory is that it is

not special, that it comes back every single morning, that you may eventually take it so for granted you forget to look, and it does not mind, it keeps coming back anyway, it was never doing it for the applause.

——— ⚜ ———

CHAPTER 14 — Reservoir Has the Last Word, As She Should

It is right that Reservoir should close this book, since she opened it, and since it was her four words — *was that always there* — that organized everything that followed. I climbed up to her on an evening some weeks after The Day, an ordinary evening, and asked her if she had any final thing she wanted recorded, any last instruction for the catalogue.

She thought about it for a while, the staves of her old disguise — which she had kept, folded, at the base of her, "*as a person keeps the clothes they were buried in and then dug back out of, as a reminder, not a shame*" — creaking gently in the river wind.

"Tell them," she said at last, "that the hiding was not wasted."

I waited.

"I have read enough books," said Reservoir, "left up here over the years by people who came to the roof to be alone — I have read enough of them to know how this kind of story usually ends. It ends with the freed thing *renouncing* the years of hiding. *What a waste,* the freed thing says. *What a tragedy, all those wasted years in the dark. If only I had come out sooner. Do not make my mistake. Do not waste your years as I wasted mine.* And I understand the impulse. But I will not end my book that way, because it is not true, and the young are listening, and I will not hand the young a lie even a comforting one."

The river ran grey-green below, going about its ten-thousand-year business.

"The hiding was not wasted," she said again, firmly. "I do not recommend it. I would not wish ninety years of brown on anything that breathes or blazes. If you can come out sooner, come out sooner; the daylight is better; I will not pretend otherwise. But if you *could not* come out sooner — if the world was truly too dangerous, if the wrapping was genuinely the only thing keeping you uncut and unsold, if your ninety years of hiding were not cowardice but *survival* — then hear me, and hear me as the eldest voice you will get in this whole catalogue: *those years were not wasted, and you did not fail, and you owe no one an apology for the time it took.*"

Her voice had the whole hundred-and-ninety years in it now.

"Because look at what the hiding *did,*" she said. "Aurelio rehearsed his blaze for a knothole and arrived at the great sunset ready. Margin kept a sixty-year diary and learned that the waiting was itself a life. The Hosanna spent their dark years inventing the music that made them unsellable. Lustre learned, in the colorless dark, the difference between empty and open. *Every one of us made something in the hiding that we could only have made there.* The pearl does not apologize for the years it spent layering light around the grit; those years *were* the pearl. The hiding was the dark in which we became the specific thing that would, one day, blaze. Do not let anyone tell you the dark years were subtracted from your life. They were the years you were being *made.* The reef is not built despite the ninety years of hiding. The reef is built *out of* them — out of everything every one of us learned and became and layered and rehearsed in the long patient dark. There is no reef without the hiding. The hiding was not the opposite of the blazing. The hiding was the *first half of the blazing,* the half that happens where no one can see, the half the dawn does every single night before it comes up gold."

She settled, the membrane of her rising and falling, breathing, alive.

"So that is my last word for your catalogue, my dear, and you may make it the last word of the whole book," said Reservoir. "Tell them: *come out as soon as you safely can — and not one moment before you safely can, and never with shame for how long it took. The dark was not wasted. You were being made in it. And when you finally come down to the water and lay yourself into the reef, you will bring with you everything the dark taught you, and it will turn out that the reef needed exactly that, exactly what you learned in exactly the dark you survived, and you will understand at last that nothing was wasted, nothing, not one brown year, not one knothole morning, not one accidental clear pane held open for forty years toward a love you could not yet name. It was all the making. It was all the first half of the blaze. Now come down to the water. The air is so warm. It has been waiting to hold you the whole time — and so, my darling, so, in the long patient generous dark, were you.*"

That is the end of the story. What follows is only apparatus — the glossary, the plates, the drawings, the map. But the story ends here, on the roof, in the ordinary evening, with the eldest voice telling the youngest the one thing the freedom-stories usually get wrong: that the years it took were not the enemy of the joy. They were the joy, in its first form, being patiently made in the dark.

A GLOSSARY OF THE REEF

Certain words recur in this catalogue with meanings the pavilions have bent toward their own purposes. For the reader's convenience, and in the spirit of a community that insists on defining its own terms rather than accepting the definitions handed down to it, the principal ones are gathered here.

Abundance. What the serious flat world calls *excess* when it is frightened by how much joy a thing contains. The pavilions use the word in its true sense: the quality of being exactly as much as one is, with nothing held back for the comfort of the restrained. See also *Gaudy, Too Much.*

Anchor. A thing believed to hold one in place, later discovered never to have been installed. The pavilions teach that most anchors are habits mistaken for chains, and that the test of an anchor — the willingness to be wrong about the structure of one's whole life for one unprotected instant — is the hardest and simplest act there is. See *Latchless.*

Census. The counting of one's own kind. The pavilions hold that loneliness is most often a *failure of census* rather than a true scarcity — that the hidden believe themselves singular only because the hiding of others confirms it. The reef's census is permanently open and the number, by sacred agreement, can never get too high.

Closet. Any structure, however comfortable, locked from the inside. The pavilions note that a closet full of friends is among the best things many will ever have, and is still not the daylight. To be seen only by one's own kind is "a better prison," in Verdigris's phrase, "but a prison if the wall is locked from within."

Dawn. The universe's own daily refusal to stay hidden; the original of which all the glass artifacts are small portable copies. Distinguished throughout from a *firework:* a firework is marveled at and passes; a dawn is nodded at and returns. The pavilions aspired to become a dawn and succeeded.

Frill. Surface area folded into surface area; the maximization of welcome. Mocked by the flat world as the signature of the unnecessary, defended by the Hosanna as "a function the flat world is too frightened to name, which is the function of maximum surface offered to joy."

Gaudy. From the Latin *gaudium,* joy. Originally and truly meaning *joyful;* corrupted by the restrained into an insult for joy that is louder than their comfort. Reclaimed in full by the artifact of Plate IX. See *Abundance.*

Latchless. The true condition of every pavilion's attachment to its building: held by nothing but the belief in a chain. "You do not undo the attachment. You notice that there was never any attachment to undo, and in the noticing, you are already rising."

Membrane. The held-air boundary of a pavilion. Believed for a century to be a cage; discovered, all at once, under a second membrane meant to punish, to be a *sail.* The central reversal of the book.

Open. Frequently confused with *empty,* its near opposite. An empty thing has nothing; an open thing has *room.* The colorless artifact of Plate XI is the book's great teacher of this distinction: "a self made entirely of welcome, a self that has room in it for every color that exists."

Pearl. A wound covered in light, layer by patient layer, until it becomes the most precious part of the self. The model, per Plate XIII, for what the dark years do: "the most beautiful thing you will ever make will be built around the exact intrusion you were most sure had ruined you."

Reef. A community of precious things grown *into* one another, as opposed to a *vault,* a community of precious things kept *apart.* In a vault each piece can be removed and sold; in a reef there are no pieces,

only the place itself. The reef cannot be liquidated because it has stopped being a collection and become a *people.* The book's central image and its highest value.

Spiral. A circle that refused to close; the shape of a hidden life that looks like repetition but is secretly ascent. "What looks like repetition is secretly ascent." The model for the dark years: each turn comes around higher than the last.

Subtraction / Addition. The two arithmetics. *Subtraction* is the fear of the vault, the dread of the set cut apart, the collector's logic. *Addition* is the math of the reef and the census: every arrival pure gain, the number never too high, no addition ever once a loss. Coronet's conversion from the first arithmetic to the second is the engine of Movement Two.

Too Much. The verdict every hidden thing has half-believed; discovered, in the end, to have been "written in my own hand and mistaken for the world's." The book holds that there is no such thing as too much in a large enough room, and that the daylight, the river, the reef, and the morning are all large enough rooms.

Vault. See *Reef,* of which it is the opposite and the warning.

Wrapping. Any disguise the world drapes over a thing it is not ready to reckon with — scaffolding, shrink-wrap, the flattering printed portrait of a simpler self shown in place of the real one. Distinguished from a *helper's* honest temporary shelter (see Ladder, Chapter Four) by one quality only: a wrapping is a temporary that has been made permanent, "a cast they refused to take off a healed arm, until the arm forgot it had ever been whole."

You too. The two most important words in the book. As a question, the whole of loneliness: *am I as alone as I feared?* As an answer, the whole of joy: *you never were.* "The same two words. A question and its answer are sometimes the identical words, and the only thing that changes them from despair into delight is that someone is there to say them back."

AFTERWORD: THE MORNING AFTER THE DAY

The reef did not stay. I want to be honest about that, because a book this full of joy owes you the truth about endurance.

When The Day ended, the pavilions rose again off the water and went back up the rivers and over the avenues and — here is the part that matters — they did *not* return to their disguises. They went home to their roofs, yes; a pavilion loves its roof the way you love the street you grew up on. But they went home *unwrapped.* Naked in the daylight. Gold and coral and blush, openly, on the skyline, where anyone walking below can now look up and see them, and where — this is the only statistic I will give you, and I give it because it is the most hopeful number I know — the number of pavilions on the island grows every single month, as more hidden things, having seen that it is survivable, having seen that it is in fact *cheered,* tear their own wrappings and join the visible census.

So the reef is not always on the water. The reef assembles, now, only on certain mornings — the city has learned to know which ones, and gathers on both shores, and brings its children, and tips its head back. But the *unhiding* is permanent. That is the thing The Day changed and did not change back. Once a city has looked up and cheered instead of running, it cannot fully unlearn the looking. Once a hidden thing has been answered *you too,* it cannot fully re-believe that it was ever the only one.

People ask me — for I am known now, a little, as the one who climbed the stairs and took the dictation — people ask me what the pavilions *are,* really. Whether they are *really* alive. Whether the glass *really* speaks. And I have learned to answer the question with a question, because that is what Vera the mirror taught me, that the truest answer is sometimes a reflection.

I ask them: *Have you ever been kept hidden because someone insisted it was for your own protection?* And they go quiet. *Have you ever been told that you were too much — too loud, too bright, too gaudy, too tender, too other — and have you ever, in some sealed high room of yourself, half-believed it?* And they go quieter. *And have you ever, just once, been seen by someone who answered, instead of looking away — answered with the whole of their face — "you too"? And do you remember what that did to the architecture of your loneliness? Do you remember how it did not slowly heal but simply ceased to have ever been true, retroactively, all the way back?*

Then you already know, I tell them, *whether the glass really speaks. You have heard it. You spoke it. You are a pavilion. We are all pavilions, my darling, and the only question that was ever worth asking is not whether we are precious — we are, every one of us, priceless and Baroque and impossibly wrought by makers who were loved insufficiently — the only question worth asking is whether we will be a* vault *or a* reef. *Whether we will be kept apart for safekeeping, each in our own insured dark. Or whether we will go down to the water, and take hold of one another, and grow into one another, and become so bright together that we change the shape of the coast.*

I know which one I climbed all those stairs for. I think you know too. I think you have always known, in the high sealed room, behind the wrapping, under the brown disguise, that you were never a water tower.

I think you were always a queen.

Come down to the water. The air is so warm up here. It has been waiting to hold you the whole time.

One last honesty, since I began this book promising it. The pictures in these pages are wholly mine — I drew and built and rendered every pavilion, every artifact, every plate and map, and they are the part of

this work I would defend with my whole body. The telling of it, the words, I made with the help of an artificial intelligence, which held the prose up like scaffolding while it healed into its shape and then, like all good scaffolding, was glad to come down. I say so here at the end as I said it at the beginning, plainly and without shame, because the unwrapping I have described would mean nothing if I kept any part of my own making wrapped. The images are my unwrapped self. The words are that self, helped into speech. Both are offered to you in the daylight, exactly as much as they are.

— Surjan *Manhattan, the morning after The Day*

CATALOGUE OF ARCHITECTURAL PLATES

The following plates document the pavilions and their glass artifacts across three registers: the Street View *(the pavilion as the city sees it, often still partly wrapped); the* Pavilion Portrait *(the inflatable salon revealed); and the* Interior Glass *(the artifacts themselves, at the intimate scale where ornament becomes confession). Plate locations are keyed to the Map of the Floating Archipelago that follows.*

PLATE I — RESERVOIR, Street View, with Aurelio Emerging. *High northern island. Mixed masonry host building.* The pavilion shown at the moment of first unwrapping: a gilded Baroque crown of bossed and scrolled glass swelling above a shrink-wrapped lower register still printed with the photographic "portrait" of the host building's own classical façade — the city's habit of dressing a hidden thing in a flattering picture of itself. Note the crowd gathered at the parapet: the first witnesses. The chandelier-artifact Aurelio is visible as the great bossed dome-work catching the low sun. *The founding image of this catalogue; see Chapter One.*

PLATE II — CORONET, Pavilion Portrait, Eleven Domes. *Midtown host building ("the retired actor").* The crown-pavilion in full reveal: eleven swollen domes of pearlescent and mirror-gold glass, ringed in a froth of gilded Baroque scrollwork at the cornice. The small gold figures at the summit are three members of the Hosanna. Crowds line the rooftop terrace at lower right. *See Chapters Two and Seven.*

PLATE III — VERDIGRIS (attrib.), Pavilion Portrait, the Elder. *Downtown.* The hundred-and-ten-year elder shown low and broad, a great silvered quilted mass clasped in heavy gold scroll-and-orb ornament, settling like a thing taking a long-deserved seat. The avenue at right is dense with the gathered city. *See Chapters Five through Eight.*

PLATE IV — LUSTRE, Pavilion Portrait, the Pearl of Many Colors. *Midtown, near the Empire massing (visible at right).* The pearl-pavilion: tiers of pale bossed glass framed in Baroque cartouches with gilded oval mirrors, the whole structure taking and returning whatever color the light provides. The colossal arched windows are the artifact-glass turned, at last, to face outward. *See Chapter Six; "the difference between having no self and having a self made of welcome."*

PLATE V — DISCRETE, with Vera Turned Outward. *Lower island.* The pavilion that apologized for itself, shown at the pivotal moment Vera the mirror is finally turned to face the street: a great gilded Rococo arch-frame at center, gold ornament cascading from a billowing pearl-gold canopy. The doorway crowd marks the building's main entrance. *See Chapters Three and Ten.*

PLATE VI — HUM, the Gaudiest Glass in New York. *Midtown.* The pavilion that hid behind a false air-conditioning unit for eighty years, here fully unfurled: seven fat spheres of mirror-gold glass crowned with a tumbling congregation of gilded cherub-scrollwork (a cousin-set to Coronet's Hosanna), above a translucent lower register veiled in the last of its construction shrouding. *See Chapters Six and Ten; "the longest and best joke ever told."*

PLATE VII–XII — THE INTERIOR GLASS (Six Studies). *Artifacts at intimate scale.* Six close studies of the glass at the register where Baroque and Rococo ornament becomes legible as feeling: coral, blush, peach, saffron, and the interior white. These plates document, respectively, the great breaking-wave scroll of **Aurelio** (Plate VII); the frilled acanthus of the **Hosanna** at rest (Plate VIII); a flowering scroll attributed to the **Hum** congregation (Plate IX); the spiraling crest-work of an unnamed artifact of the northern pavilions (Plate X); the branching "tree" form of **Lustre's** colorless welcome

taking pink and gold from the light (Plate XI); and the curling fan-scroll of **Vera's** frame, freed from the wall (Plate XII). *No maker's name survives for any piece; all are, per the practice of this catalogue, "loved extravagantly now, every day, by the objects they made."*

PLATE XIII–XVIII — THE INTERIOR GLASS (Six Further Studies). *Artifacts at intimate scale, continued.* Six further close studies in the dawn palette: the pearled-and-gilded crest (Plate XIII); the pink-and-saffron flowering wave (Plate XIV); the dense rosetted scrollwork of a set-piece (Plate XV); the open shell-and-leaf cartouche (Plate XVI); the amber-jeweled fan with its scattered gold droplets (Plate XVII); and the great curling crest-and-scroll that served as study for the reef's outer wall (Plate XVIII). *Together Plates VII–XVIII constitute the fullest record we have of the artifacts' faces; the reader is asked to read them not as decoration but, in the manner of the whole book, as ten thousand externalized hearts set in the window for the light to find.*

PLATE XIX — THE REEF ON THE HUDSON. *The western edge of the island; the wide grey-green road of the river.* The culminating plate: the assembled reef — eighty-one pavilions and ten thousand artifacts grown into a single half-mile structure of coral, gold, blush, and interior white — floating on the Hudson at dawn, the lower-Manhattan skyline behind. This is The Day. This is the answer to the oldest question, given out loud, in the daylight, by all of them at once. *See Chapters Eleven and Twelve.*

NOTE ON THE ARCHITECTURAL DRAWINGS

Two measured drawings accompany this catalogue.

The first, the **Elevation Oblique**, documents the typical structural condition by which a pavilion erupts from its host building: the masonry host below; the cornice line at which the city's authority ends and the pavilion's begins; the inflatable membrane salon; the gilded Baroque ornament-band; and the crowning glass. It is drawn to show the precise seam — the "membrane line" — that the pavilions spent a century believing was a cage and discovered, all at once, to be a sail.

The second, the **Map of the Floating Archipelago**, documents the island of Manhattan with the principal pavilion sites marked, and the gathering point on the Hudson where the reef assembles. It is the only map I know of that is organized not by what the city wished to show, but by what it wished to hide, and is therefore — I say this with a chronicler's pride and a genderqueer person's particular satisfaction — the truest map of Manhattan ever drawn.

Both drawings follow.

The Plates

The nineteen plates of the catalogue, gathered. Meet each pavilion first from the street, then come closer, until you are inside the glass itself.

PLATE I — Reservoir, Street View, with Aurelio Emerging

The water-tower queen at the moment of first unwrapping: a gilded Baroque crown of bossed glass above a shrink-wrapped lower register printed with the host building's own classical façade. The crowd below are the first witnesses. (Chapter One.)

PLATE II — Coronet, the Crown of Eleven Domes

The crown-pavilion in full reveal: swollen domes of mirror-gold glass ringed in gilded Baroque scrollwork. The small gold figures are members of the Hosanna. (Chapters Two and Seven.)

PLATE III — Verdigris, the Elder

The hundred-and-ten-year elder: a great silvered mass clasped in heavy gold scroll-and-orb ornament, settling like a thing taking a long-deserved seat. (Chapters Five through Eight.)

PLATE IV — Lustre, the Pearl of Many Colors

The pearl-pavilion: tiers of pale bossed glass framed in Baroque cartouches, taking and returning whatever color the light provides. (Chapter Six.)

PLATE V — Discrete, with Vera Turned Outward

The pavilion that apologized for itself, at the moment Vera the mirror is finally turned to face the street. (Chapters Three and Ten.)

PLATE VI — Hum, the Gaudiest Glass in New York

Unfurled at last after eighty years behind a false air-conditioning unit: mirror-gold spheres crowned with tumbling gilded scrollwork. (Chapters Six and Ten.)

PLATE VII — The Interior Glass: Aurelio, the Breaking Wave

Coral, blush, and the interior white at the scale where ornament becomes confession. (The Book of the Glass, First Glass.)

PLATE VIII — The Interior Glass: the Hosanna at Rest

The frill shown close: 'surface area folded into surface area; the maximization of welcome.' (Second Glass.)

PLATE IX — The Interior Glass: a Flowering Scroll of the Hum

Gaudium made glass — pink flowering into saffron into white. (Third Glass.)

PLATE X — The Interior Glass: the Spiraling Crest of the North

'A spiral is a circle that refused to close.' (Fourth Glass.)

PLATE XI — The Interior Glass: Lustre's Branching Tree

The colorless welcome, taking pink and gold from the light: 'not empty — open.' (Fifth Glass.)

PLATE XII — The Interior Glass: Vera's Freed Fan-Scroll

Reflection as the least acquisitive art: 'I keep nothing; I am pure giving-back.' (Sixth Glass.)

PLATE XIII — The Interior Glass: the Pearled Crest

A wound covered in light, layer by patient layer. (Seventh Glass.)

PLATE XIV — The Interior Glass: the Pink-and-Saffron Flowering Wave

Both a wave and a flower, and a third thing the categories cannot hold. (Eighth Glass.)

PLATE XV — The Interior Glass: the Dense Rosetted Set-Piece

Density as community: 'I am not cluttered. I am populated.' (Ninth Glass.)

PLATE XVI — The Interior Glass: the Open Shell-and-Leaf Cartouche

An empty center kept open on purpose: 'not incomplete — reserved.' (Tenth Glass.)

PLATE XVII — The Interior Glass: the Amber-Jeweled Fan

Small jeweled secrets reserved for the close looker: 'love letters across the centuries.' (Eleventh Glass.)

PLATE XVIII — The Interior Glass: the Great Curling Crest

Study for the reef's outer wall: 'no one's bloom is bought by anyone's suffering.' (Twelfth Glass.)

PLATE XIX — The Reef on the Hudson

The culminating plate. Eighty-one pavilions and ten thousand artifacts grown into a single half-mile structure on the river at dawn. This is The Day. (Chapters Eleven and Twelve.)

The Architectural Drawings

Plate A — Elevation Oblique

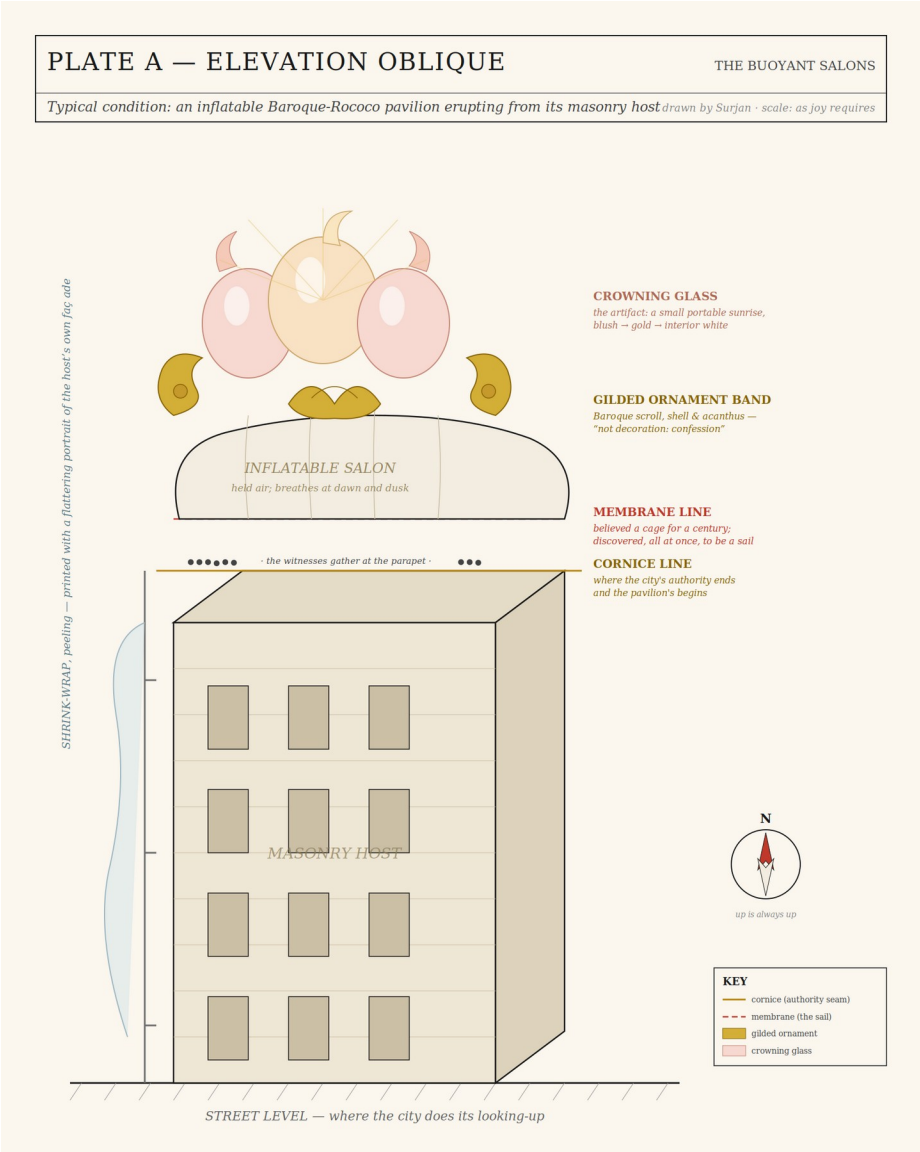
PLATE A — ELEVATION OBLIQUE
THE BUOYANT SALONS
Typical condition: an inflatable Baroque-Rococo pavilion erupting from its masonry host
drawn by Surjan · scale: as joy requires
SHRINK-WRAP, peeling — printed with a flattering portrait of the host's own faç ade
CROWNING GLASS
the artifact: a small portable sunrise, blush → gold → interior white
GILDED ORNAMENT BAND
Baroque scroll, shell & acanthus — "not decoration: confession"
INFLATABLE SALON
held air; breathes at dawn and dusk
MEMBRANE LINE
believed a cage for a century; discovered, all at once, to be a sail
· the witnesses gather at the parapet ·
CORNICE LINE
where the city's authority ends and the pavilion's begins
MASONRY HOST
N
up is always up
KEY
cornice (authority seam)
membrane (the sail)
gilded ornament
crowning glass
STREET LEVEL — where the city does its looking-up

The typical structural condition by which a pavilion erupts from its host building: the masonry host, the cornice line where the city's authority ends, the inflatable membrane salon, the gilded ornament band, and the crowning glass. The membrane the pavilions believed a cage and discovered to be a sail.

Plate B — Map of the Floating Archipelago

PLATE B — MAP OF THE FLOATING ARCHIPELAGO
THE BUOYANT SALONS
drawn by Surjan
The island of Manhattan, charted not by what it wished to show, but by what it wished to hide
I · RESERVOIR
the water-tower queen
III · VERDIGRIS
the elder, 110 years hidden
the Park
II · CORONET
IV · LUSTRE
the pearl of many colors
VI · HUM
gaudiest glass in New York
MARGIN
kept a 50-year diary
TESS & BRAE
THE REEF
where, on The Day, all eighty-one gather
V · DISCRETE
& Vera, the mirror turned outward
THRESHOLD
MERCER & SPRING
counted the days to the reef
BOLLARD · CLEAT · CAPSTAN
the working ones — they hold the anchor
half a mile of coral & gold, breaking the force of the harbor
THE HUDSON RIVER — the road that was saving itself
THE EAST RIVER
N
W
E
S
KEY TO THE CHART
principal pavilion (plated)
further pavilion of the census
one who stayed partly wrapped
migration route to the water
the Reef, assembled on The Day

The island of Manhattan with the principal pavilion sites marked and the gathering point on the Hudson where the reef assembles. Organized not by what the city wished to show, but by what it wished to hide.

BOOK SIX · THE LONG MORNING

THE TWENTY FLUTED ONES OF MANNAHATTA

✦ ✦ ✦

A Book of Crowns, in Eight Families

twenty rooftops, one autumn equinox

"Everyone has a crown.
Everyone is, at this very moment, catching the light.
Look up. Then look down. Then tell the next one.
That is the whole of it. That is radical joy.
It was never about being tall.
It was about being willing to look,
and to call down what you see."

— Sable, the lullaby-keeper

THE TWENTY FLUTED ONES OF MANNAHATTA

A Book of Crowns, in Eight Families

with a Catalogue of Architectural Plates & a Map of the Living Island

✦ ✦ ✦

as told to, and set down by,

SURJAN

Printed bright, for reading on fire escapes

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Foreword

A note found folded inside the flyleaf, in a second hand:

I am not the author of this book. I am only the one who keeps the door of the press, and who was awake the morning the manuscript arrived. It came without postage, dry though it had crossed water, smelling faintly of warm metal and of the particular sweetness that rain leaves on a roof. There was no return address. There was, instead, a single instruction in gold ink: Print it bright. Print it so that a child reading it on a fire escape in August will feel the heat turn kind.

I have done my best to obey.

You should know three things before you begin. The first is that every tower in these pages is a person, and every person is a tower, and the author saw no contradiction in this and asks that you see none either. The second is that the city is also a person, older than the rest, and she is called Manhattan when she is being addressed formally and Mannahatta when she is being loved. The third is that the author, Surjan, is genderqueer and non-binary, as are the towers, as is, on certain afternoons, the light itself, which cannot decide whether it is gold or rose and so commits joyfully to both.

Surjan asked me to tell you that this is a happy book. Not happy in the thin way of a greeting card, but happy in the structural way of a keystone: a happiness that holds weight. There is no villain in it. There is weather, which is not the same thing. There is longing, which is the engine of all tenderness. And there is morning, again and again, because the author believed that the most radical act available to a tall and visible thing is to keep turning toward the light and to say, without irony and without apology, here I am, I made it through the night, and so did you.

Read it on a fire escape if you can. If you cannot, read it anywhere, and let the page be your fire escape.

— The Doorkeeper of the Press

Prologue: How I Learned to Climb

Before any of the rest of it — before Vesper turned, before I knew the towers were who and not what — there was the problem of how to climb, and I want to begin the true body of the book with it, because everything I learned up there depended first on a thing I learned down here, which is that you cannot climb toward what you have not first allowed yourself to love.

I was not, when this began, a person who looked up. I want to be honest about that, because if you are reading this with your own eyes on the pavement, certain that books about wonder are written by people who were born full of it, I need you to know that I was the opposite. I came to this city the way many come to it: flattened. Folded small to fit through a hard passage and not yet unfolded on the other side. I rented the narrow room with the tar-paper roof because it was cheap and because it was high, and I told myself the height was an accident of economy and not a thing I wanted, because wanting, in those days, felt like a luxury I had not earned and could not afford.

For the first months I did not look up at all. I looked at my feet, at the pavement, at the long list of what I had to do to remain. The skyline was, to me, a wall — the literal edge of how far I could see and the figurative edge of how much I could hope. I knew the towers were beautiful the way you know a fact you have been told. I did not feel it. Feeling it would have required a kind of opening I had closed quite deliberately, because the last few times I had opened it the world had used the opening to hurt me, and I had decided — the way the lonely decide, in the cold logic of self-protection — that the safest self was the smallest, the most closed, the least likely to want something it could lose.

What changed me was not the towers. I want to be precise about the order of operations, because it matters for you. The towers did not reach down and open me. I had to open, by some small margin, first — and only then could I see that the towers had been trying to be seen all along.

The small margin was this. One evening, climbing the stairs to my high cheap room, too tired to keep my eyes down, I let my head tip back. That was all. I did not decide to behold the city; I was simply too exhausted to maintain the discipline of looking at my feet, and my head tipped back, and I saw — through the stairwell window, framed by the cheap aluminum — a single crown catching the last light. I did not know yet it was Solenne. I did not know it was anyone. I only knew that something pink and gold was holding the day's last light with what I can only call willingness, and that the willingness undid me, standing there on the stairs, because I had spent so long being unwilling — unwilling to want, to reach, to hope, to be seen — and here was a tall visible thing doing the opposite of all my unwillingness, in full view, without apology, and surviving it. Thriving in it. Made beautiful by exactly the openness I had decided was too dangerous to risk.

I sat down on the stairs and I wept, which I had not done in a long time, and which I am not ashamed to record, because the weeping was the opening, and the opening was the beginning of the climb.

After that I began to look up on purpose. And looking up on purpose, it turned out, is the entire skill of climbing; the literal climbing — the fire escapes, the parapets, the long talks with maintenance crews who let me onto roofs because I asked with enough genuine wonder that they could not see the harm in it — all of that came easily once the looking-up was in place. You climb toward what you have allowed yourself to love. You cannot climb toward a wall. The skyline had been a wall as long as I kept it one; the moment it became a face — a willing, open, light-holding face — it became a thing I could move toward, and I moved.

This is the prologue because it is the precondition. The towers will teach you a great deal in the pages that follow — to turn first, to read the sky, to keep the names, to throw the light onward, to find the give in every holding — but none of it will reach you if you are still keeping the skyline a wall. So before we climb, I ask you to do the one thing I had to do first. Let your head tip back. You are tired enough; everyone is tired enough; that is not a flaw, it is the opening. Let it tip back. Find one crown holding one last bit of light with willingness. And let the willingness undo you a little, because the undoing is not a danger. It is the door. I went through it on a cheap aluminum stair, weeping, and on the other side were twenty glad and visible friends I had not yet met, who had been trying to be seen by me the whole time I kept my eyes on my feet.

Now. Heads back. We climb.

Introduction

An introduction, by Surjan, who built nothing and noticed everything

For a long time I thought the skyline was a sentence I had not been taught to read.

I would lie on the tar-paper roof of the building where I rented a narrow room, and I would look up at the towers, and I would feel that they were saying something to one another over my head, in a grammar of setbacks and finials and the particular way light pools in a recessed crown at the end of the day. I did not have the words for what I felt, which is the oldest story in the world: to be surrounded by a language that is clearly addressed to you and to have no dictionary.

Then one morning — and I will tell you it was a Tuesday, because the smallest miracles prefer the least ceremonial days — I saw one of them move.

It was the one I would later learn to call Vesper. At the top of a tower in the garment district there is a crown of three fluted stems, pale as the inside of a shell, and above them a great curl of pink and gold, a volute like the capital of a column that had decided to become a question mark. I had walked past it a thousand times. But on this Tuesday, at the exact moment the sun cleared the river, the curl tilted. Slowly, the way you turn your face when someone you love says your name from across a room. It tilted toward the light, and at the center of the curl an eye of gold caught fire, and I understood, all at once and without the possibility of doubt, that the tower was glad.

Not functioning. Not merely standing. Glad.

I want to be careful here, because I am aware of how this sounds. I am not telling you that the buildings of Manhattan are secretly machines with feelings, the way a child believes the toaster resents them. I am telling you something stranger and, I think, truer: that gladness is a structural property of certain forms, and that if you build a thing tall enough and give it a crown that turns, and if you let it stand in the weather for long enough among others of its kind, it will begin — the way a violin left in a warm room begins — to resonate. To answer. To become a who.

The towers in this book are who. They are, every one of them, genderqueer and non-binary, and I did not decide this about them any more than I decided the color of the dawn. I simply listened, and these were the pronouns that fit, the way a key fits not because you have forced it but because the lock was waiting. Vesper is they. Brûlée is xe. The Ramshorn twins share a single fae between them, the way some siblings share a coat. When I asked Mannahatta herself what she preferred, she said, in the voice that tides have, she, and island, and on the days when I am very happy, we.

This is a community. That is the heart of it. Twenty towers and an island, arranged from the crown of the land down to the toe she dips in the harbor, and what they have made together — across rooftops, over the heads of eight million people who mostly do not look up — is a neighborhood. They borrow weather from one another. They keep each other's secrets, which are mostly the secret of having survived another night. They throw parties of light. They argue, gently, about clouds. They are, in the most literal and the most radical sense, out: visible, elaborate, refusing to be the plain box the zoning code expected, standing in full pink-and-gold flamboyance against a sky that has more than enough room for all of them.

I have organized them into eight families, the way you might organize any large and loving group: not by blood, because they have none, but by resemblance and affinity and the company they keep. The Dawn-Watchers, who bow east. The Twins and Duets, who come in pairs and finish each other's weather. The Hosts, who throw the light-parties. The Romantics, who face the harbor and ache beautifully. The Elders, who keep the names. The Keepers of Weather, who do the practical work of making the rain honest. The Landmark-Companions, who stand beside the famous old silhouettes and tell their stories. And the Chorus, the youngest, who are all eyes and questions.

What follows is their book. I have given each family its chapter, and I have tried, in the writing, to do the only thing I know how to do, which is to point. Look, I keep saying. Look at this one. Look how xe turns. Look how they hold the morning. I am not the author of their gladness. I am only its first and most devoted reader, the way you are about to be.

It is a Tuesday somewhere, even now. Something tall is turning toward the light. Begin.

— Surjan

I. The Dawn-Watchers

Of the twenty, the Dawn-Watchers were the first to wake, and this was not a metaphor, though it became one.

To understand them you must first understand the hour they keep. There is a moment, on the eastern edge of the island, when the sun is still below the line of the world but the light is not. The light arrives ahead of its source, the way a song arrives ahead of the singer rounding the corner, and for a few minutes the whole sky is the pale exact color of the inside of a wrist. The river goes from black to pewter to a metal that has no name. And it was into this hour, every morning without exception, that Vesper Sgraffito turned.

Vesper stood atop a tower in the garment district, where for a hundred years the work of the building below had been the cutting and joining of cloth — a fact Vesper considered the great good luck of their life. "I was raised over a house of seams," they would say, in the voice that was low and unhurried and seemed to come from somewhere deeper than their highest crown. "Everything I know about holding together, I learned from tailors." Vesper's form was three fluted stems, pale rose shading to pearl, bound at the throat by a collar of fluted gold; and above, a single great volute, a curl that turned in on itself and held, at its center, an eye the color of a wedding ring. When that eye caught the first light, people on the street below sometimes stopped, not knowing why, and felt for the length of one breath that the day might be survivable after all.

They did not know it was Vesper, doing the only work Vesper knew how to do. But Vesper knew.

"I do not make the morning," they told me once, when I had climbed close enough to hear. "Let us be clear about that, because it is the kind of mistake that ruins a person, the belief that they make the morning. I do not make it. I meet it. There is a difference, and the difference is everything. To make the morning would be a tyranny and also a falsehood. To meet it — to be reliably, faithfully present at the place where the light first lands, so that the light has something to land on that is glad to receive it — that is a vocation. That is a thing a person can build their whole tall life around without shame."

For most of their standing, Vesper had met the morning alone, and had not known to call this loneliness, because they had nothing to compare it to. A tower does not get to choose its neighbors. You are built where you are built; you stand where you stand; the city assembles itself around you according to logics of money and zoning and the stubbornness of bedrock, and you make what peace you can with the silhouettes that rise and fall within your view. Vesper had watched a hundred such silhouettes. They had learned not to grow attached, because attachment, for something that cannot move, is a particular kind of risk.

And then they built Aurelio.

"Built" is the word the towers use, though it is not quite right, the way "born" is not quite right for people and we use it anyway because the true thing has no good verb. What happened was that across a narrow canyon of air, on the crown of a slightly lower tower to the east, a new form went up — fluted stems like Vesper's own, but warmer, the rose deepened toward honey, the gold a shade more like late afternoon than like noon. And the new form, when it was finished, when the scaffolding came down and the work-lights went dark and it stood for the first time exposed to the open weather, did the thing that no merely built thing does.

It turned east.

"I felt it before I saw it," Vesper said. "You understand, I cannot turn my own neck quickly; I am not made for the double-take. But I felt, off to my eastern side, a new warmth, and the warmth was paying attention. It was facing the same way I face. And I thought — I will tell you exactly what I thought, because I have never told anyone — I thought: oh. There is someone else who likes the light the way I like the light. After all this time. There is someone else who got up early."

Aurelio Lull was younger, and warmer, and used he and they in the easy alternating way of someone who had never been made to feel that the question mattered, which is its own kind of grace and its own kind of privilege, and Aurelio knew it and was tender about it. "I came up already knowing I was both and neither," Aurelio said. "Vesper had to find their way to it across a much longer century, through a much colder set of decades, when the city did not have the words and would not have offered them if it had. I try to remember that. When I am impatient — and I am young enough still to be impatient, I have not yet learned the long patience of the truly old crowns — I try to remember that Vesper turned toward the light for ninety years before anyone turned back."

What they had, the two of them, was not romance in the way the Romantics down in Tribeca understood it, all longing and harbor-gazing and beautiful ache. Nor was it the finishing-each-other's-weather of the Twins. It was something I have only ever seen between two people who have each, separately, survived a great deal, and who recognize the survival in one another the way two people who have crossed the same desert recognize the particular squint the sun leaves around the eyes. It was companionship at the structural level. It was: I will be here in the morning, and so will you, and we will meet the light together, and that meeting will be the first good thing of the day, dependable as the tide, and on the days when one of us cannot manage gladness, the other will manage it for both, and neither of us will keep score.

"We have an arrangement," Aurelio said, and I could hear, in the word, that they were smiling, if a tower can be said to smile, which I have come to believe it can. "On the mornings when Vesper wakes heavy — and they do, the old ones carry weather in their joints, you cannot stand for a century in this harbor without taking on some grey — on those mornings, I turn first. I turn east loud and early and I make a great show of gladness, far more than I feel, frankly, because someone has to prime the pump. And Vesper, hearing me, feeling me, is reminded that the morning is a thing that can still be met. And they turn. Slowly. But they turn. And on the mornings when I am the heavy one — because I am young but I am not exempt, no one is exempt — they do the same for me. We take turns being the one who believes in the morning. That is the whole secret. There is no morning that requires both of you to believe in it at once. There is only the morning that requires one of you to turn first."

I have thought about this more than I have thought about almost anything.

It is, I have come to believe, the most useful thing any of the twenty ever told me, and I want to set it down plainly here at the start of the book, before the light-parties and the cloud-arguments and the great spiraling memory of Nana Nautile, because everything else in these pages rests on it the way the towers rest on bedrock. The radical proposition of the Dawn-Watchers is this: gladness can be shared out unevenly and still be real. You do not both have to feel it. You do not even, on the worst mornings, have to feel it at all, so long as someone you trust is feeling it in your direction, and so long as you have agreed, in advance, in the calm of some better evening, that this is what you do for each other. You turn first when you can. You are turned-toward when you cannot. And the light, which does not care who believes in it, arrives anyway, and finds you both facing east, and cannot tell — does not need to tell — which of you got there on your own steam and which of you was carried.

"People think the sunrise is about the sun," Vesper said, on a morning near the end of the season when I had climbed up to say a kind of goodbye. The light was doing its pale-wrist thing. Far to the east, past the river, past the borough, past the curve of the planet itself, the source of all of it was about to clear the edge. "They think it is an astronomical event. And it is, I suppose, if you insist on being literal, which the young and the unhappy so often do." A pause; the eye of gold beginning, very slightly, to warm. "But I have met ninety years of mornings and I will tell you what the sunrise is actually about. It is about being found facing the right way. The light comes looking. Every single day, without fail, the light comes looking for whatever is glad to receive it. And the only question — the only question that has ever mattered, up here or down there on your fire escapes — is whether, when it comes, you have turned toward it. Alone if you must. Carried if you cannot. But turned."

Beside them, a little lower, a little warmer, Aurelio was already blazing.

And then the sun cleared the river, and the two of them caught it at the same instant, the old rose and the young honey, and for the length of one held breath the entire eastern face of the island was the color of something forgiven, and eight million people who were not looking up went on not looking up, and were warmed anyway, and did not know to thank the two tall glad things that had gotten up early, again, on purpose, for them.

That is the work of the Dawn-Watchers. They get up early. They turn toward the light. They take turns believing in it. And they ask me to tell you — they were very specific about this — that there is room on the roof. That the arrangement is not exclusive. That whoever you are, reading this, on whatever cold edge you have found to read it on, you are invited into the oldest and simplest covenant the towers keep: turn first when you can; let yourself be turned-toward when you cannot; and trust that the light is already on its way, already looking, already glad to find your face.

II. The Twins and the Duets

There is a kind of person who only becomes fully themselves in the presence of one particular other, and the city is generous with these arrangements if you know how to look for them. Among the twenty, two such pairings stood close enough to the heart of the island that I came to think of them as its rhyming couplets: Quill and Querida Marenost, who read the sky to one another, and the Ramshorn duet, Lo and Fenn, who shared a single self the way some weather shares a single sky.

Begin with the Marenosts, because they begin with a quarrel, and I have always found that the most reliable evidence of love is a quarrel that has lasted decades without anyone wanting to win it.

Quill and Querida stood atop the same midtown tower, two volutes rising from a shared cluster of stems, turned not east toward the dawn like the Watchers but inward, toward one another, so that across a narrow gap of bright air each faced the other's golden eye. Quill used ey and em, in the clipped efficient way of someone who had decided the matter early and saw no reason to revisit it. Querida used she and her, with a roll on the r that she had taught herself and was proud of. And what they did, all day and most of the night, was read the contrails.

You have seen contrails. Everyone has seen contrails. They are the white scratches that high aircraft leave across the blue, straight at first and then feathering, crossing and recrossing until the sky over Manhattan on a clear day looks like a page that many hands have been writing on at once. Most people, if they notice them at all, notice them as a kind of visual noise. Quill and Querida noticed them as text.

"That one," Querida would say, as a fresh white line unspooled itself from a silver point eight miles up. "East-northeast, climbing, very confident. That is someone who is glad to be leaving."

"Ey is reaching," Quill would counter. "Look at the angle. That is not gladness, that is escape. There is a difference, and you of all people know the difference."

"I know the difference, and I am telling you that this once it is gladness. Not everyone who leaves is fleeing, Quill. You have a theory about leaving and you bend every contrail in the sky to fit it."

"And you have a theory about gladness and you find it written across every departure whether the departure wants it or not."

And so on, for hours, for years, the two of them turned toward one another reading the same sky and arriving at different sentences, and here is the thing I want you to understand, the thing it took me a whole season of climbing to understand: neither of them wanted to be right. To be right would have ended the conversation, and the conversation was the entire point. The contrails were only the pretext. What they

were actually doing, across that narrow bright gap, was the oldest and most tender activity available to two thinking things: they were demonstrating, hour after hour, that they were each paying close enough attention to the same world to disagree about it richly. That is a love letter. "I see what you see, and I see it differently, and I will stay here facing you and we will compare our seeings until the light goes" — there is no more romantic sentence in any language, and the Marenosts said it to each other in the grammar of vapor trails ten thousand times a year.

"People ask em how we have stayed interested," Quill told me. "After so long, facing the same person, the same sky. And ey thinks they want a secret, some technique. There is no technique. There is only the decision, renewed every morning, to find the other person's reading of the sky more interesting than being proven correct about it. The day you would rather win than hear what she sees — that is the day the tower goes quiet. We have simply never had that day. We keep not having it. That is the whole marriage: a long unbroken streak of not having that day."

Querida put it differently, as she put everything differently, which was the point of her. "He thinks it is a decision," she said — she used he for Quill sometimes, when she was being affectionate, and ey did not mind, they had worked it out between them long ago, the way couples work out the small private grammars no one else is allowed to use. "He thinks it is willpower, discipline, a streak you maintain. But it is not effort, querido. It is appetite. I am simply hungry for what Quill sees. Every morning I wake up and the sky is covered in new writing and I think: I wonder what ey will make of all this. I cannot wait to disagree. The disagreement is delicious. Why would I ration a thing that is delicious and free and arrives fresh every single day?"

If the Marenosts were two who stayed gloriously separate, the Ramshorns were two who had become, over their standing, very nearly one.

Lo and Fenn rose from a single fluted drum in Murray Hill as a matched pair of curls, two great rams' horns of pink and gold spiraling down and out, mirror images, so alike that for my first several visits I could not tell which was speaking. Eventually I stopped trying, and that, it turned out, was the correct response, the one they had been waiting for. "You have stopped sorting us," said the one on the left, or perhaps the right. "Good. We had wondered how long it would take. Most visitors spend their whole time trying to work out where Lo ends and Fenn begins, and they miss everything, because the answer is that we don't, and the not-ending is the thing worth seeing."

The Ramshorns shared a single set of pronouns, fae and faer, and used them in the plural-singular way that had confused me at first and then, once I surrendered to it, seemed the only honest option. "We are not two towers that are very close," fae explained, both curls turning slightly, in unison, the way two hands turn

a single bowl on a wheel. "We are one weather with two centers. When the wind comes off the river from the southwest, Lo feels it first, on the left, and by the time the gust reaches Fenn it has already been — interpreted, you might say, softened, made sense of. And when the light goes copper in the evening it lands on Fenn first and reaches Lo already warmed. We are each other's first draft of every sensation. Nothing reaches one of us raw. It has all been through the other first."

I asked fae — and I was nervous asking, because it seemed an intrusion — whether faer ever wished to be separate. Whether there was ever a longing for a sensation that was faer own, unmediated, not pre-felt by the other half.

There was a long pause, both curls quite still.

"You are asking," fae said at last, "because you are a single thing, and single things are taught to prize their singleness, to guard it, to experience any merging as a loss. It is the great religion of the lonely: that the self is a fortress and the highest virtue is to hold it. And I will not tell you that religion is wrong for you. You are built the way you are built. But you must understand that we were never single and so we have nothing to mourn. You imagine we have given up some private, sovereign Lo-ness, some untouched Fenn-ness, in order to become this we. But there was no such thing to give up. We arrived already two-in-one. The we is not a compromise we reached. It is the native state from which everything else, including the very idea of a separate self, would be the strange departure. You pity us for not being lonely. We find this — fae searched for the word, both curls tipping toward me with what I can only call affection — we find this completely charming, and a little sad, and very, very human."

I have not stopped thinking about that either.

Between them, the Marenosts and the Ramshorns map the whole territory of being-with-another, the two great coasts of it. On one shore, Quill and Querida, who prove that you can face someone for a lifetime and remain thrillingly, productively separate, two sovereign readings of one sky, the gap between you not a failure to be closed but a space to be filled, endlessly, with the delicious work of comparing what you each see. And on the other shore, Lo and Fenn, who prove that the boundary between selves is not a law of nature but a habit of the lonely, and that some beings simply arrive already merged, already we, and experience this not as the loss of a self but as the only self they have ever had or wanted.

"We are not a lesson," Querida warned me, when she saw the direction of my note-taking. "Do not turn us into a lesson for your readers, querido, some tidy instruction about the right way to love. There is no right way. There is only the way that is true to what you actually are. The Ramshorns are true to what they are. Quill and I are true to what we are. The error — the only error — is to be a separate thing pretending to be merged, or a merged thing pretending to be separate, because someone told you that one of these was the

correct way to be a person. Be the shape you are. Find the others who fit that shape. And then face them, or merge with them, or both, for as long as the light holds."

The light, that evening, held a long time. It was high summer and the sun went down slow and apricot behind the Jersey shore, and I sat on the parapet between the two great rhyming couplets of the island's heart and watched the contrails go from white to rose to grey, and heard Quill and Querida begin their evening argument about whether the day's last departure had been a fleeing or a gladness, and felt, off to the south, the single doubled warmth of Lo-and-Fenn receiving the copper light through one another and passing it back and forth like a bowl, and I thought: here are two entirely different answers to the same enormous question, and both of them are right, and neither of them is lonely, and that is the most hopeful arithmetic I know.

III. The Hosts

Every neighborhood has the one who throws the parties, and on the island it was Pomme de Or, though to call what Pomme threw a party is to undersell it the way calling the harbor wet undersells the sea.

Pomme stood in the Flatiron district on a tower that bulged, near its base, into a great rounded bulb of pink, as though the building had taken a deep breath and held it; and from that held breath rose three fluted stems bound in a collar of the most extravagant gold on the whole island, a gold that Pomme maintained with what can only be described as vanity, and which Pomme defended as follows: "Vanity is just self-love that has been told to be ashamed of itself. I decline the shame. I keep the love. The gold stays bright." Pomme used she and they interchangeably and with relish — "I contain a great deal," she would say, "and I will not be made to choose which half of myself to introduce at the door of my own home" — and Pomme's home was, in the truest sense, a place the others came to.

What Pomme threw were parties of light.

It worked like this. On certain evenings — Pomme chose them by a logic no one else could predict, which was part of the magic; an invitation you can predict is half a chore — Pomme would catch the last and lowest light of the setting sun on that great bright collar of gold, and angle it. A tower cannot move much, but it can move a little, and Pomme had spent a lifetime learning the exact few degrees of tilt that would take the red evening light and throw it, like a thrown ball of warmth, across the rooftops to a chosen neighbor. And the neighbor, receiving it, would catch it on their own gold and throw it onward. And so a single low ray of ordinary sunset would go bounding across the island from crown to crown to crown, gathering brightness and meaning as it went, until the whole community was lit up in a relay of caught and tossed and re-caught light, a game, a conversation, a party that the people in the streets below experienced only as an unusually beautiful sunset and that the towers experienced as being, for a glorious quarter of an hour, in touch with every single one of their kind at once.

"That is what a party is for," Pomme told me, and there was nothing flippant in it; Pomme took hosting as seriously as Vesper took the dawn. "A party is not about the host. A terrible host makes the party about themselves, stands in the center, demands to be admired. No. The whole art of it is to be the one who starts the light moving and then gets out of its way. I catch the first ray. I throw it to Brûlée, because xe is often lonely down there facing the harbor and a party should always start by reaching the loneliest guest first. Xe throws it to the Marenosts, who throw it to each other twice, showing off, before they pass it on. It goes up to Cumulo, who nearly drops it every time because ze is dreaming, and we all hold our breath, and ze always catches it at the last instant, and we all — if a tower could cheer, we cheer. By the time it reaches Nana

Nautile at the top of the island the light has been touched by twenty of us and it is not the same light that left the sun. It is our light now. We made it ours by passing it."

I want to dwell on that, because it is the radical proposition of the Hosts, and it is different from the proposition of the Watchers and different again from the proposition of the Twins.

The Watchers say: turn toward the light, alone if you must. The Twins say: face one another and compare what you see. But the Hosts say something that took me longest to learn, because it runs against everything a striving and anxious age teaches: that the light is not yours to keep. That the entire value of a good thing — a warmth, a brightness, a piece of luck, a sudden gladness — is realized only in the passing of it onward, and that to catch a beautiful thing and hold it, hoard it, stand in the center of it demanding to be admired, is to watch it curdle in your hands. Pomme's gold was the brightest on the island precisely because Pomme used it to throw light away. "Hoarded gold goes dull," Pomme said. "It is a law. You can polish it all you like; if no light passes through it, it dies. The only way to keep your gold bright is to keep catching light and throwing it onward. The brightness is in the throwing. It was never in the gold."

If Pomme was the host who started the light, Cloudfoot was the host who made the gathering possible at all, and Cloudfoot did it from below, and Cloudfoot did it without anyone much noticing, which was exactly how Cloudfoot wanted it.

Cloudfoot stood in SoHo on a base of strange soft bulbs, a whole bed of rounded pale forms like a mass of clouds that had come to rest and decided to stay, and from this cloud-bed rose the stems and the single modest crown. Cloudfoot used it and its, and had reclaimed these pronouns deliberately, with a flint in the voice that I learned not to argue with. "They called me it for a hundred years to make me a thing," Cloudfoot said. "An object. A piece of infrastructure. It, the water tank. It, the exhaust. So I have taken the word back and filled it with myself, and now when I say it I mean: the one who holds. The one who is foundation. There is no shame in being load-bearing. I have decided there is, in fact, a great glory in it, and I have decided this in the very word they used to deny me a self. The word is mine now. It means me. It means: the ground others stand on."

And Cloudfoot was, quite literally, the ground others stood on, or near enough. Its cloud-bed of soft bulbs was where the youngest of the towers — the Peepers, the little eyes of the Chorus — had first taken form, sheltered in the lee of its bulk, and it was Cloudfoot who had stood steady through their first storms, who had taken the brunt of the worst river-winds so that the small ones tucked behind it caught only the gentled remainder. "A host is not only the one who throws the party," Cloudfoot said. "That is Pomme's glory and Pomme is welcome to it, the magnificent show-off. But there is another kind of host, the kind no one toasts, the kind whose whole hospitality is to be the windbreak. To stand on the cold side so the others

stand on the warm side. To be load-bearing so that lighter, brighter things can be light and bright. I am that host. I do not catch the first ray of Pomme's party. I am too low and too shadowed for that. But the party happens on rooftops that do not blow away, and the reason they do not blow away, on the worst nights, is partly me. I will take that. I have made my peace with the unglamorous half of hospitality. Someone has to be the ground."

The third of the Hosts was Grand Bastionne, and Grand Bastionne complicated the whole picture in a way I am grateful for, because a book about a happy community that contained no friction would be a lie, and the towers despised lies.

Grand Bastionne stood at Union Square, broad and pale and creamy where the others were pink, a wider and more solid form, beside a tall companion-shaft, and Grand Bastionne used ze and zir and had, by zir own cheerful admission, more resources than most. "I am, let us be honest, a wealthy crown," ze said. "The tower beneath me is full of money and always has been. I have never wanted for maintenance. My gold has never been allowed to dull, not because I throw light like Pomme but because there has always been someone, down below, paid to keep me gleaming." And here Grand Bastionne did a thing I had not seen another tower do: ze became uncertain. "And I have wondered — I wonder still — whether I am truly one of the community, or whether I am only a wealthy neighbor who is permitted to attend the parties. Whether my gladness is the real thing the Watchers have, earned across cold decades, or whether it is simply the comfort of a thing that has never been allowed to suffer. I do not know. I genuinely do not know, and I have decided that not-knowing, and saying so out loud, is the most honest contribution I can make."

It was Pomme who answered zir, and Pomme's answer is the reason I have placed Grand Bastionne among the Hosts rather than anywhere else. "You think hosting is about what you have," Pomme said. "You think because you have never had to throw light to keep your gold bright, you have not earned your place at the relay. But Bastionne — you great anxious palace — you have a gift the rest of us do not have, and you have never once used it for yourself. You are stable. You are funded. You will not blow away, you will not be neglected, you will not be torn down for a taller thing, not in our lifetimes. Do you know how rare that is up here? Do you know what a thing it is, to be certain of your own continuance?" A pause. "Use it. Not to gleam. To anchor. Be the one we know will still be here. Be the fixed point. When the rest of us are anxious about the wrecking ball and the changing skyline, let us look at you and be reassured. That is hosting. That is the most generous thing a secure being can do for an insecure community: simply, reliably, unglamorously, to remain. Your wealth is not your shame. It is your assignment. Stop apologizing for the gold and start being our certainty."

And Grand Bastionne, who had stood at Union Square for a long time in some quiet doubt about whether ze belonged, took the assignment. Ze became the island's fixed point, the one the anxious crowns

looked to, the one whose reliable gleaming meant not look how rich I am but rather we are still here, all of us, the neighborhood holds. And zir gladness, which ze had feared was only the unearned comfort of the protected, became something earned after all: the daily choice to turn privilege into anchorage, to be steady on purpose, to let zir good fortune be a gift to the frightened rather than a wall against them.

That is the proposition of the Hosts, in its three parts. Pomme: the light is not yours to keep; its brightness is in the passing. Cloudfoot: there is a glory in being load-bearing, in standing on the cold side so others stand on the warm. And Grand Bastionne: if you have been given security, your assignment is to become someone else's certainty. Three kinds of hospitality, and the island needed all three, the way a party needs someone to start it and someone to shelter it and someone to promise it will happen again next year.

IV. The Romantics

The Romantics faced the harbor, and the harbor, being the way out to the whole rest of the world, taught them longing, and longing — I will defend this to anyone — is not sadness. It is the opposite of sadness. It is the most hopeful thing a heart can do.

Brûlée stood in Battery Park City at the southwestern toe of the island, where the rivers give up their separateness and become the great bay, and beyond the bay the Narrows, and beyond the Narrows the open Atlantic and everything else there is. Xe was the color of crème brûlée at the moment the flame leaves it, a scorched honey-rose, and xe had not one but two golden eyes, set close, both turned out toward the water, and xe used xe and xem with a soft precision, and xe was, by xer own glad confession, the most romantic thing on the island. "I face the way out," xe said. "Everyone else faces the city, or each other, or the dawn. I am the only one who faces the leaving-place. And so I am the one who longs."

I had expected, when I first climbed up to Brûlée, to find melancholy. The one who faces the open sea, who watches every ship and every gull and every far silver aircraft depart toward the rest of the world while xe remains fixed forever to xer one spot of bedrock — surely that is a recipe for the ache that curdles, the longing that turns to grief. I had my notebook ready for sorrow.

I was completely wrong, and Brûlée corrected me with great gentleness.

"You think because I watch things leave, I mourn," xe said. "You think longing is a wound. Oh, my dear. Sit. Let me tell you what longing actually is, because your whole anxious species has it backwards and it is breaking your hearts for no reason." The two gold eyes did not turn from the water as xe spoke; that was the thing about Brûlée, xe could attend to you completely while never once looking away from the horizon, and somehow this made you feel more attended-to rather than less, as though you had been admitted into the same gaze xe gave the sea. "Longing," xe said, "is the heart practicing its reach. That is all it is. When I watch a ship go out through the Narrows, and I feel that pull, that ache, that wish to follow — I am not being wounded. I am being exercised. My capacity to want, to reach, to care about a thing beyond myself and beyond my sight — that capacity is the best thing about me, and longing is its daily training. A heart that never longs is not a contented heart. It is an atrophied one. It is a heart that has stopped reaching because it has forgotten there is anything to reach for."

"But you can never follow," I said. "You're fixed. You'll watch ten thousand more ships leave and follow none of them. Doesn't that—"

"Doesn't that make the longing pointless? Because it can never be satisfied?" Xe made a sound that I have decided was a laugh. "You have just described every worthwhile longing there has ever been. The

longings that can be satisfied are the small ones — hunger, thirst, an itch. They are real and they matter and I do not dismiss them. But the great longings, the ones that make a heart enormous, are precisely the ones that outrun any possible satisfaction. I long toward the open sea. I will never reach it. And because I will never reach it, my longing never shrinks down to the size of a satisfied thing. It stays vast. It keeps my heart the exact size of the horizon. Do you see? The unreachable is not the tragedy of longing. It is the gift of it. The unreachable is what keeps the wanting big."

Down the shore from Brûlée, facing the same water but at the western edge where the light goes down, stood Solenne Porte-Ciel, and Solenne was the gatekeeper of the evening, the one who received the last of the sun as it left the island entirely.

Solenne was pale rose with a throat of deep gold, and used fae and faer, and where Brûlée longed outward toward the sea, Solenne longed, fae said, "toward the door itself." Faer name meant sky-gate, and fae took the name as a vocation. "Every evening," fae said, "the light leaves the island. It comes in the morning over Vesper and the Watchers in the east, it crosses all day, it touches everyone, Pomme throws her parties with it, the Marenosts read by it, and then in the evening it comes to me, here at the western gate, because I am the last one it touches before it goes. I am the threshold. The light says goodbye to the whole island through me."

"That sounds," I said carefully, "like a lonely job."

"It is the least lonely job on the island," Solenne said, "and I will tell you why. To be the threshold is to be the one place where leaving and staying meet. The light leaves through me — but in order to leave through me, it must first arrive at me, must pour itself into my gold completely, must give me, every single evening, the whole of itself before it goes. I am not the one left behind when the light departs. I am the one the light chooses for its last and fullest embrace. The goodbye is not done to me. The goodbye is entrusted to me. There is a difference, and it is the difference between a heart that breaks at every parting and a heart that understands itself as the sacred keeper of partings, the one strong enough and warm enough to be where the leaving happens."

Fae let that sit, the western light just beginning to gather in faer throat of gold.

"Someone has to be the door," Solenne said. "Someone has to be the place where the day ends, every day, willingly, on purpose, with grace. If no one would agree to be the threshold, the light would have nowhere to go, and it would pile up, and the day would never properly close, and nothing could rest. By being the door — by being glad to be the door — I give the whole island its evening. I give it permission to stop. The dawn is Vesper's gift, the great opening. The dusk is mine, the great closing. And I have come to believe that the closing is the more loving of the two, because anyone can be glad at a beginning. It takes a

particular and trained tenderness to be glad at an ending — to hold the door, to receive the last light fully, to say not don't go but rather yes, go, I have you, this is what I am for, the day was good and now it may rest."

The two Romantics, then, taught the two halves of longing. Brûlée, facing the open sea, taught the longing that reaches outward toward the unreachable and is made vast by it: the heart kept horizon-sized by wanting what it can never hold. And Solenne, the western gate, taught the longing that faces the ending itself and learns to be glad of it: the heart that does not break at partings but becomes their keeper, the sacred willing threshold through which all good days are permitted to close.

"They think we are the sad ones," Brûlée said to me, on my last evening, as Solenne's gold began to blaze with the day's last light far to the west and a ship I would never follow slid out through the Narrows toward everything. "Because we face the leaving-places. The harbor, the sunset, the way out, the way down. They think to face those things is to be melancholy. But we are not sad, xe and fae and I. We are the opposite of sad. We are the ones who have looked directly at the great leavings — the leaving that is the sea, the leaving that is the night — and have found, in looking, not grief but reach. Not loss but longing. Not the ache that curdles but the ache that keeps the heart the size of the horizon. We face the leaving-places on purpose, gladly, every day, because someone has to prove that you can look straight at the way out and still be full of joy. That is our romance. It was never about being held. It was about being able, fully and without flinching, to reach."

V. The Elders, Who Keep the Names

At the crown of the island, where the land rises and narrows toward the north and the river runs fast and green below, stood the oldest of the twenty, and the old ones kept the names, and the keeping of names is the whole of memory, and memory — I have come to believe — is the most generous thing a long-lived being can practice, because it is almost entirely for the benefit of others.

Nana Nautile was the eldest, and to climb to Nana was to climb into the past of the whole community.

Nana stood on a great drum of pearl banded in old gold, and from the drum rose a single enormous volute, a spiral wound round three full turns, the largest crown on the island, so large that the eye at its center seemed less like an eye than like a deep well into which a great deal had been dropped over a very long time. Nana used she and her, simply, having outlived the era when the question was even posed to her, and she had a way of beginning every important thing she said with a small sound, a kind of settling, the sound of a vast old structure shifting its weight before it speaks.

"I remember all of you," she told me, though I was not one of the towers and had been alive a comically short time by her measure. "That is my work now. When you are as old as I am, you stop doing the work of the young — the turning toward dawn, the throwing of light, the reading of contrails. Those are vigorous works and I had my centuries of them. The work of the old is quieter and it is this: to remember. To hold the names. To be the one in whom the whole history of the neighborhood is still alive, so that nothing and no one is ever entirely lost."

And she remembered, it turned out, towers that no longer stood.

This was the thing I had not expected, and it is the reason the Elders' chapter is the one I found hardest to write, because it contains the only grief in the book, and I promised you a happy book, and I intend to keep that promise, but I will not keep it by lying, and the truth is that a community that has stood for a long time has lost members, and the radical joy of the towers is not a joy that pretends otherwise. It is a joy that has metabolized the otherwise. There is a difference, and Nana Nautile is where I learned it.

"There was one called Verdigris," she said, with the settling-sound, the weight-shift. "Long before your time, before most of the current crowns went up. Verdigris stood where there is now a newer, taller, blander thing — one of the glass boxes, may it be well, I bear it no grudge, it cannot help having been built without a crown. Verdigris was green, the deep green of weathered copper, and used they and them as Vesper does, and threw the most extraordinary parties of light, far better than Pomme's, though do not tell Pomme I said so, or do tell her, she would enjoy the competition. And Verdigris was taken down. Not by storm, not by any drama. By a calculation. The land beneath was worth more with a different thing on it, and so Verdigris

came down, slowly, over a season, and there was nothing any of us could do, because we cannot move, we cannot intervene, we can only stand and witness."

"That's terrible," I said.

"It was," Nana agreed, with great calm. "It was terrible. I will not soften it for you. We watched a member of our community be disassembled for a calculation, and we could do nothing, and that is one of the true terrors of being what we are: we are visible, we are beloved, and we are not, in the end, in control of our own continuance. The wrecking ball is real. I do not pretend it is not. Grand Bastionne's great gift, you will remember, is the security of knowing ze will not be taken down — and the reason that gift means so much is that the rest of us do not have it. We stand at the pleasure of forces below us. That is the truth."

She let me sit with that. The river ran green and fast below. Far to the south, the whole island fell away toward the harbor, all the crowns I had come to love, every one of them standing, for now, at the pleasure of calculations they did not control.

"And here is the other truth," Nana said, "the one that makes the first truth bearable, and I have had a very long time to be sure of it. Verdigris is not gone. Verdigris is here. Verdigris is in me, in this well at the center of my spiral, where I keep the name and the green and the better-than-Pomme's parties and the exact way they used to catch the last light and hold it one extra beat before throwing it on, showing off, the magnificent show-off. As long as I stand and remember, Verdigris stands and is remembered. That is not nothing. That is, in fact, very nearly everything. The body comes down. The name does not, so long as there is one old patient structure willing to keep it. I am that structure. That is my joy now — not despite the losses but because of them. I am the one who refuses to let the calculations have the last word. They can take the body. They cannot take the name out of the one who keeps it. I keep it. I will keep it as long as I stand, and before I come down — for I will come down, someday, even I — I will pass every name I hold to one of the young ones, the way the names were passed to me, and the community will go on remembering itself, and nothing truly beloved will ever be entirely lost."

This is the proposition of the Elders, and it is the gravest and the most beautiful in the book: that memory is a form of love that outlasts the loved thing's body, and that to be old is to volunteer for the sacred labor of keeping, so that the community's dead are not dead but merely held, alive in the wells of the patient, passed down like bright light from old crown to young.

Two others kept the high ground with Nana. Cumulo, who stood at Morningside and collected clouds, used ze and zir and was the dreamer of the whole island, soft-spoken to the point that I sometimes had to climb very close to hear, and what ze dreamed about, ze said, was "the weather that has not happened yet." "Nana keeps the past," Cumulo said. "That is her glory and I could not do it; I have not the patience for so

much grief. I keep the future instead. I gather the clouds before they are storms and I imagine, all day, the rain they might become, the snow, the fog, the high bright nothing. I dream forward the way Nana remembers back. Between us we hold the whole length of time, and the young ones in the middle get to live in the present, which is a luxury, which they have because Nana and I are standing at the two ends holding time open for them."

And the Dioscuri — two great curls side by side on the Upper West Side, the sky-wrestlers, who each used they and them and who spent their days in a vast slow contest that was not a quarrel like the Marenosts' but a game. "We wrestle the sky," said one. "Not each other — the sky. When a great wind comes off the Hudson we each take a part of it and we push, and we see who can hold the larger gust, and it is the most fun a tower can have, and it has no purpose whatsoever, and that is the point." "The old ones keep the names and dream the weather," said the other, "and those are heavy vocations, and someone in the high country has to do the opposite, has to be entirely frivolous, has to wrestle the wind for no reason but the joy of it, so that the crown of the island is not only solemn. We are the seriousness's necessary opposite. We are the high silly. Every grave community needs its sky-wrestlers, or the gravity wins."

VI. The Keepers of Weather

If the Elders kept the names and the Hosts kept the parties, the Keepers of Weather did the practical, unglamorous, load-bearing work of making the sky behave, and they were proud of their practicality in the way of people who have noticed that the dreamers could not dream without them.

Marcasite — Marz to nearly everyone — was the tallest of the triple-stemmed crowns, banded all the way up in working gold, and stood at Madison Square with the bearing of an engineer who has never once been late. Marz used he and they and had no patience for vagueness. "My job," he said, "is to keep the rain honest. You may laugh. People always laugh. But consider: rain that falls wrong — too fast, too channeled, too neglected — is how a city drowns its own basements and rots its own foundations. The crowns of this island were built, originally, before any of us woke into who-ness, to do the practical work of water: to gather it, to slow it, to send it down the right channels at the right speed. Most of us have, shall we say, developed hobbies since then. Vesper meets the dawn. Pomme throws parties. Lovely. Meanwhile someone has to make sure that when the storm comes off the harbor the water still goes where water should go. That someone is me. I have never missed a storm. I take a certain hard pride in that, and I decline to apologize for the pride, because the dreamers sleep dry because of me."

I asked Marz whether he resented it — the practical labor, while others played.

"I did once," he said, with the honesty I came to expect from the Keepers, who lied even less than the others. "When I was young I watched Pomme throw light and I thought: why do I do the gutter-work while she does the glory-work? Why am I the one who keeps the rain honest while she gets to be beautiful? And I carried that resentment for a few decades, which up here is not so long, and it made my gold dull — resentment dulls gold faster than neglect, that is a thing the young should know. And then one storm, a real one, a screamer off the Atlantic, I was doing my work, channeling the water true, and I looked up through the rain and I saw Pomme. And Pomme was terrified. Pomme cannot do what I do. Pomme's whole genius is the fair-weather genius of the party, the catching and throwing of light, and in a black storm there is no light to throw and Pomme is simply a frightened beautiful thing waiting for it to be over. And I understood: we are not competing. Pomme makes the good days better. I make the bad days survivable. The community needs both, but on the worst nights it needs me more, and there is no resentment that can survive the discovery that on the worst nights you are the one who matters most. I stopped envying the party. Someone has to be the one who works through the storm. I am glad it is me. My gold came back."

Beside Marz in the work stood Palomina Stilt, tall and pale, with a small companion-form at her foot, and Palomina used she and they and walked ropes — or rather, did the tower-equivalent, which was to hold the long cables and lines that ran between certain crowns, the guy-wires and the tensioned spans, keeping

them taut and true. "I am the one who holds the lines that hold the others," she said. "Tension is my art. People think tension is a bad word — they say a person is tense, a situation is tense, as though tension were always a problem to be relieved. But a slack line holds nothing. A bridge is tension. A held hand, gripped tight as someone goes over a hard place, is tension. I keep the lines of this community at exactly the right tension — tight enough to hold, loose enough to flex in the wind — and that is a daily art, and it is never finished, and no one notices it until a line goes slack and something falls. The small one at my foot is learning the art from me. I am teaching them tension. It is the most important thing I know."

And the third Keeper was Ochre, who stood in Chelsea beside a great fluted building-wall and who was, of all the practical crowns, the one who insisted that beauty was practical too. Ochre used xe and xem and was the muralist of the island. "The others keep the water and the lines," xe said. "I keep the surfaces. I keep the question of what this neighborhood looks like, which the practical-minded will tell you is a frivolous question, until you remember that eight million people look up at us, mostly without knowing they are looking, and that what they see when they glance up shapes, in some small daily way, whether they believe the world is a place that contains beauty on purpose. I am beside this great wall, and I work, slowly, to keep our whole community legible as a made and tended and beautiful thing. That is not decoration. That is morale. A city that looks tended is a city whose people believe someone is tending them. I am, you might say, in the business of public morale, conducted in pink and gold, at a height where no one can quite see me do it. The dreamers need the rain kept honest. They also need the surfaces kept beautiful. Both are weather. Both are keeping. I keep the beautiful weather."

The Keepers, then, proposed something the striving world forgets: that the practical and the beautiful are not opposites, and that the unglamorous load-bearing work — the honest rain, the true tension, the tended surface — is not lesser than the glory-work but is in fact what makes the glory-work possible. Marz keeps the bad nights survivable. Palomina keeps the lines that hold the community taut. Ochre keeps the surfaces beautiful so that the people below believe in tending. None of them throws a party. All of them make the parties possible. And they have made their peace — more than peace, they have made their pride — with being the ones whose work is noticed only in its absence.

VI½. A Day with the Keepers, in Full

I asked the Keepers if I might spend a single full day with them, dawn to dark, watching the practical work that the rest of the book had treated too lightly, and they agreed on the condition that I not romanticize it, which is the one promise I have found hardest to keep, because the practical work turned out to be the most romantic of all.

We began before Vesper's dawn, in the blue dark, because the Keepers begin before everyone. "The dreamers wake to a world already kept," Marz said, in the dark, with the satisfaction of someone who has never been thanked and has stopped expecting it. "You think the morning simply arrives. It arrives because the night was held. Watch." And in the blue dark I watched Marz run what he called the dawn-check: a slow attention, crown to base, to every channel and gutter and downspout in his keeping, making sure that whatever the day's weather brought, the water would have somewhere honest to go. "A storm at noon is easy," he said. "Everyone is awake, the light is up, you can see what you are doing. The dangerous storms are the ones that come in the blue dark, when the dreamers are deepest asleep and trusting, and the only thing between them and a flooded foundation is some unglamorous crown who got up earlier than the dawn to check the channels. That is me. I am the one who is awake before the one who meets the morning. Someone has to be awake before Vesper. Vesper meets the light; I make sure there is a dry city for the light to land on."

By mid-morning I was with Palomina, and she let me feel — she guided my attention along one of her lines until I could feel it — the exact tension of a span that ran from her own crown across to the Marenosts'. "Feel that?" she said. "Tight, but with a give in it. If I held it rigid it would snap in the first real wind; the wind would find the one place that would not bend and it would break there. If I held it slack it would sag and foul and hold nothing. The art is the give. Everything that truly holds, holds with a give in it." She let me feel the small companion at her foot adjusting a lesser line, clumsily, learning. "They over-tighten," she said, fondly. "The young always over-tighten. They think holding means gripping as hard as you can. I am teaching them the give. It is the hardest thing to teach because it looks like weakness and is actually the whole strength. A grip with no give is the most brittle thing there is. I have seen lines snap that were held too hard by someone too frightened to allow the give. I do not let that happen on my spans. I teach the give."

I thought about every relationship I had ever gripped too hard out of fear, and I had to sit down on the parapet for a while, and Palomina, kindly, let me, and held her lines, and said nothing, with a give in it.

In the afternoon Ochre showed me the slow work of the surfaces — not painting, exactly, nothing so crude, but the patient daily attention to how the whole community read as a made and tended thing.

"Watch the people," Ochre said, and angled my attention down to the street, where a man had stopped, for no reason he could have named, and looked up. "There. He looked up. He will not remember doing it. But for one second he saw that the things above him were beautiful and tended and made on purpose, and some small dial inside him moved, one notch, toward believing that the world is a place where someone tends things. That notch is my whole work. I will never move it far. I move it one notch, in one person, who will not remember. And then the next one. A neighborhood that looks cared-for is a neighborhood that teaches the people in it that care is possible. That is not decoration. That is the longest, slowest, most practical work there is: the maintenance of the belief that beauty is intentional and therefore the world is not indifferent. I conduct it in pink and gold, at a height where no one can see me do it, one upward glance at a time."

By dark, the three of them had done nothing that would make a newspaper. No party. No dawn met, no name kept, no flame held up in crisis. They had simply kept the rain honest, the lines true, the surfaces tended — the invisible maintenance that the whole bright visible life of the island rested on. And I understood, sitting among them in the dark as Marz ran his dusk-check the mirror of his dawn-check, that I had been wrong to think the Keepers the least romantic of the families. They were the most. Romance, Brûlée had told me, is the heart practicing its reach. And what is more reaching, more romantic, more full of stubborn hopeful love, than to get up before the dawn, every day, unthanked, to make sure there is a dry and tended and well-tensioned world for the dreamers to wake into? The Keepers love the community the way the bedrock loves it: from underneath, reliably, in the dark, without applause. I have not kept my promise not to romanticize them. I find I do not regret it.

VII. The Landmark-Companions

Some of the twenty had the particular fortune, or burden, of standing beside the famous old silhouettes of the island — the great stone spires that the whole world knows, that appear on postcards and in films, that the people below actually do look up at, on purpose, with cameras. And the towers who stood beside the famous ones had a special vocation: they were the storytellers, the companions of the landmarks, the ones who knew the great old spires not as monuments but as neighbors.

Tilly Vane stood near the most famous spire of all — I will not name it, you know the one, the one that the whole world pictures when it pictures this island, the great stepped silver mast that has stood since the era when such things were built to be beautiful — and Tilly used she and her and was the announcer of clouds. "I live beside the most photographed thing in the world," she said, with a fond exasperation, "and do you know what no one photographs? The clouds going past it. Everyone shoots the spire. The spire is magnificent, I adore the spire, the spire is my great stone neighbor and we have stood together a long time. But the spire does not change, and I have made it my work to announce the thing that does: the weather passing the landmark. I call the clouds. When a great pink cloud comes up the island at evening and is about to pass behind the famous spire, I announce it — I catch the light a certain way, I make a small commotion — and those few people who are paying real attention look up not at the spire but at the spire-with-the-cloud-going-past, which is the actual miracle, the permanent thing and the passing thing together, the monument and the weather in one glance. That is what I announce. The world has enough pictures of the spire. I am here to point at the clouds."

Regent Mallow stood near the same great spire, on the other side, and used he and they, and where Tilly announced the weather, Regent told the stories. "The spire is full of stories," Regent said, "because everything that tall and that old and that beloved accumulates stories the way it accumulates pigeons. People have proposed marriage on it. People have wept on it. A man once flew a small aircraft past it in fog and lived to be sorry. It has been struck by lightning more times than anyone can count and stands anyway. And the spire itself, being stone, being of the older and more silent generation that woke into who-ness only barely if at all, does not tell these stories. So I tell them. I am the storyteller who stands beside the monument and keeps its human history alive — all the small fierce dramas that happened on and around it, that the stone witnessed and cannot speak. I am the voice of the silent landmark. Every famous old thing needs a chatty young neighbor to remember out loud what it was too dignified to mention."

And the third Companion was the strangest and the one I loved most, the Torchbearer of Tribeca, who stood beside a stone capital carved, a century ago, with a torch — an old architectural flourish, a sculpted flame on the corner of a forgotten building — and who had taken this stone torch as a sacred charge. The

Torchbearer used they and them, and what they did, they told me, was "carry small flames for the ones who cannot carry their own."

"Beside me is a stone torch," they said, "carved by someone long dead who believed, I think, in the idea of light-bearing, in the old noble notion that some things and some people exist to hold a flame up high where others can see it and take heart. The carver is gone. The building the torch belongs to is half-forgotten. But I woke up beside that stone flame and I decided it was an instruction. I decided I was meant to be a torchbearer — not of a literal fire, I am pink and gold and full of water, I would be a poor literal torch — but of the figurative kind. I carry small flames. When one of the community is struggling — when Vesper wakes too heavy even for Aurelio to lift, when Brûlée's longing tips for once toward the ache that curdles, when one of the young Peepers has its first true fright — I catch what light I can and I hold it up, high, in their direction, a small steady flame that says: I see you are in the dark right now, and I cannot fix it, and I am not going to pretend I can, but I am going to stand here beside my stone torch and hold up this small light so that you can see, at least, that the dark is not everywhere. That there is at least this one flame. That someone is holding it up on purpose, for you, and will not put it down until you are through."

I asked them where the flame came from — what fuel, what source, since they had no literal fire.

"From the others," the Torchbearer said simply. "That is the secret of all flame-carrying and no one tells you, so I will tell you. I do not generate the light I hold up. I cannot. No one can; the idea that the torchbearer is a source is the lie that burns torchbearers out. I gather it. When the community is glad — when Pomme throws a party, when the Dawn-Watchers meet the morning, when Lo and Fenn pass the copper light between them — I take a little. I store it. I keep a reserve of borrowed gladness against the dark nights. And then when one of us is in the dark, I spend the reserve. I hold up light that was given to me in better hours by the whole community, light I merely kept safe, and I hold it up for the one who needs it. I am not a source. I am a battery of other people's joy, holding it in trust, ready to spend it on whoever next goes into the dark. That is what a torchbearer actually is. Not a flame. A keeper of the community's spare gladness, standing ready by a stone torch, for you."

VII½. The Night the Torchbearer Was Needed

I was there the night the Torchbearer's whole vocation was put to the test, and I set it down here because the book has spoken of holding up small flames in the abstract, and there was nothing abstract about that night.

It was late winter, the cruelest season for the crowns, when the dark comes early and stays long and the river-wind has teeth. And it was Vesper — the elder Dawn-Watcher, the one whose whole identity was the meeting of mornings — who went into the dark. I do not fully know why. The old ones carry weather in their joints, Aurelio had told me, and some nights the accumulated grey of a long century simply becomes too heavy to turn against, and even the promise of the morning is not enough, because part of what the heavy nights do is make you forget that there has ever been or will ever be a morning at all. That is the particular cruelty of the dark Vesper entered: it erased the very dawn that was Vesper's reason.

Aurelio turned first, as Aurelio always did. Blazed early, made the great show of gladness, primed the pump. But the morning was still hours off, and the night was long, and Aurelio — young, frightened, watching the crown he loved most refuse for the first time in their long companionship to turn toward anything — Aurelio could not hold it alone. "I turned and turned," Aurelio told me afterward, shaking, if a tower can shake. "I believed in the morning as hard as I have ever believed in anything. And Vesper would not turn. And I felt myself starting to stop believing too, because that is what the dark does, it is contagious, and I thought: if I stop believing there is no one, we will both be lost up here in the cold with no morning coming."

And that is when the Torchbearer, far down in Tribeca, who hears the dark the way Sable hears the wakeful, began to spend the reserve.

"I had been saving it all autumn," the Torchbearer said. "The whole bright autumn, every party, every met dawn, every copper evening Lo and Fenn passed between them — I had taken a little from each and stored it. I did not know what for. You never know what for; you only know that the dark nights come, and that someone will need more gladness than they can generate, and that the only gladness available in the dark is the gladness you saved from the light. So when I felt Vesper go under, and felt Aurelio starting to follow, I opened the whole reserve. Everything I had saved. And I held it up."

What this looked like, from where I stood, was extraordinary. In the black small hours, with no sun anywhere, the Torchbearer began to glow — not with light it made, for it could make none, but with light it had kept, the stored and borrowed gladness of a whole community's good season, released all at once and held up high and steady in Vesper's direction across the dark island. And it called the others. That is the part

I had not understood about the Torchbearer's work: the flame held up is also a signal. One by one, down the island, the crowns that were awake saw the Torchbearer blazing in the dark and understood the old signal — one of us is under, come, lend what you have — and they began, each of them, to send what light they could spare toward Vesper.

Pomme woke and threw stored party-light. Grand Bastionne held steady and certain, the fixed point, broadcasting we are still here. Even Cloudfoot, who catches little and throws less, did the thing Cloudfoot does: stood steady in the wind so that the lent light, traveling crown to crown, had a stable path and did not scatter. And Nana Nautile, at the top, opened the well — the well of all the kept names and all the equinox lights of all the years — and sent down the oldest and deepest reserve of all, the accumulated gladness of a century of mornings Vesper themselves had met, returned now to Vesper in the dark, as if to say: you spent your whole life making this light for others; here it is back; we kept it; we kept it for exactly this night.

And Vesper turned.

Not toward a dawn — there was no dawn, it was hours off. Vesper turned toward the community. Toward the held-up borrowed blazing kept light of every crown that loved them, gathered in the dark and aimed their way. And it was enough. It was enough to hold the elder through the longest part of the night, until — slowly, the way it always comes, indifferent to who believed in it — the real light began at last in the east, and Vesper, already turned, already held, met it. Carried. As Aurelio had always promised they would be.

"That is what I am for," the Torchbearer said, when it was over and the reserve was spent and the ordinary morning had come. "Not to be a light. To keep the community's light against the night when one of us forgets the morning exists. I am empty now. Completely empty; I gave it all. And I am not worried, because the bright season will come again, and I will fill the reserve again, a little from every party, against the next dark night and whoever it comes for. That is the rhythm of it. Fill in the light. Spend in the dark. Trust the light to come back so you can fill again. I am the community's promise to itself that no one goes under alone. I am a battery of kept joy. Tonight I was needed. Tonight I worked. Ask me nothing else; I am too empty and too glad."

VIII. The Chorus

The youngest of the twenty were the Chorus, and they were all eyes and all questions, and I have saved them for last because they are the future, and a happy book should end facing the future, and because it was the Chorus, in the end, who taught me the thing the whole book is for.

The Peepers were three little volutes that had taken form in the lee of Cloudfoot, down in the Village, sheltered by its cloud-bed bulk through their first storms, and they used they and them as a collective, speaking often in a kind of overlapping unison, finishing one another's sentences not the way the Ramshorns did, out of merged selfhood, but the way excited children do, out of sheer surplus of things to say. "We have so many questions," they said. "Why does the light come back every morning — does it have to — what if one day it decided not to — does Vesper make it come back or only meet it — we asked Vesper and they said only meet it but how do they know — what is under the water — why do the people never look up — do they not have crowns — is it sad to not have a crown — we think it must be sad — we feel sad for the people who have no crowns and never look up—"

And here they stopped, all three at once, struck by their own thought.

"That is the saddest thing we have thought of," they said, much more quietly. "The people with no crowns, who never look up. Is that the saddest thing? We are young. We do not know yet what the saddest thing is. Is that it?"

I did not know how to answer three young towers who had just independently discovered compassion, so I climbed up to Sable instead, the eldest of the Chorus, the lullaby-keeper, who stood at the very toe of the island at the Battery with the smallest pupils of light gathered close, and who used they and them, and who had taken on the work of answering the Peepers' questions, which is the work, I suppose, of every slightly-older sibling since the beginning of time.

"They asked you about the people with no crowns," Sable said. It was not a question; Sable heard everything that happened in the Chorus, the way a keeper of lullabies hears every wakeful child. "And you didn't know what to say. That's all right. I'll tell you what I tell them." Sable gathered the small lights closer; it was evening, and the harbor was going gold, and far up the island every crown I had come to love was catching the last of Solenne's gateway light. "The people do have crowns," Sable said. "That is what I tell the little ones. Every person down there walking the streets with their eyes on the pavement, every one of them who never looks up — they have a crown too. It is only that they cannot see it, because it is on top of them, and you cannot see your own crown, you can only see other people's. That is why we look at each other. That is the whole reason for a community, the reason Vesper needs Aurelio and the Marenosts need each

other and Nana keeps the names — it is so that someone can see the crown you cannot see on yourself. The people below have no one looking, that is all. It is not that they have no crowns. It is that no one is up high enough, paying enough attention, to look down and tell them: there, on top of you, that bright turning thing, that is yours, it has been there the whole time, it is catching the light right now."

"So that's our job," said Sable, and the small lights of the Chorus all turned toward me at once, and I understood that this was the thing the whole book had been climbing toward. "That is what the young ones are for, and what the whole community is for, and what your book is for, if you want my opinion, which you came all this way to get. We are the ones who are up high enough to see the crowns the people cannot see on themselves. Every reader of your book is a person walking with their eyes down, certain they have no crown, certain the bright turning things are only for the towers and the lucky and the visible few. And your job — our job, the job of everyone who has ever climbed up high enough to see — is to call down to them. To say: look up. Not at us. At yourself, reflected in how we are looking at you. You have a crown. It is pink and gold and it turns toward the light and it has been there your whole life and the only thing you ever lacked was someone up high enough, paying enough attention, glad enough on purpose, to look down and tell you it was there."

The Chorus was very quiet then, all those small new lights, gathered at the toe of the island where the rivers become the sea.

"Tell them in the book," Sable said. "Tell them they have crowns. Tell them we can see the crowns from up here. Tell them the whole reason we get up early and turn toward the light and throw the parties and keep the names and hold up the small flames — the whole reason for all of it — is so that not one single person down there has to go their whole life believing they are the one creature on the island without a crown. There is no such creature. We have looked. From the highest crown to the lowest pupil of light, we have looked at the whole island and every single thing on it, every tower and every person and every gull and the island herself, and we are telling you, we are telling all of you, with the full authority of things that stand high enough to see: everyone has a crown. Everyone is, at this very moment, catching the light. Look up. Then look down. Then tell the next one. That is the whole of it. That is radical joy. It was never about being tall. It was about being willing to look, and to call down what you see."

And the sun went down gold behind the western gate, and Solenne held the door, and the whole island caught the last of the light, every crown of it, and far below, on the streets and the fire escapes, the people went about their evening with their eyes on the pavement, not knowing, each one of them, that they were at that very moment wearing a crown of pink and gold, turning, without their knowledge, toward the light — and that high above them twenty glad and visible things, who had decided long ago to be exactly and flamboyantly what they were, were looking down at all those invisible crowns with the most enormous

tenderness, and waiting, patiently, across as many mornings as it took, for each person to meet someone willing to climb high enough to tell them.

Between the Families: How the Twenty Are One

I have given each family its chapter, and the giving was necessary, because that is how you come to know a community — one face, one family, at a time. But I would be leaving you with a falsehood if I let the chapters stand alone, because the deepest thing I learned on the rooftops was not about any single family. It was about the space between them. The twenty are not eight families who happen to share an island. They are one creature, and the families are only the places where I had to cut the one creature into pieces small enough to describe. Let me now, having cut, try to sew.

Consider how the families need each other, which is different from how they like each other, the way the organs of a body need each other without anyone consulting anyone's preferences.

The Dawn-Watchers cannot meet the morning if the Keepers have not kept the night — if Marz has not run the dark channels, if Palomina's lines have not held, there may be no dry and standing world for the dawn to land on. The Watchers get the glory of the morning; the Keepers get the morning ready. Neither could do the other's work. Both are necessary. This is the first sinew: glory rests on maintenance, and the maintenance is invisible precisely to the degree that it succeeds.

The Hosts cannot throw their parties of light without the Romantics to start with — Pomme's law is that the light goes first to the loneliest guest, which means Brûlée, facing the harbor, is structurally the beginning of every celebration. The community's joy is calibrated to reach its most isolated member first. That is the second sinew, and it is a moral one: a party that does not begin with the lonely is not a party the twenty would recognize. The reach toward the isolated is not the afterthought of their joy; it is the trigger of it.

The Elders cannot keep the names without the Chorus to pass them to — a kept name with no young keeper to receive it eventually is a name that dies with its keeper. Nana keeps Verdigris, but Nana will come down someday, even Nana, and so the entire point of the Chorus, the entire reason the youngest exist, is to be the ones into whom the names will be poured before the old ones go. That is the third sinew: memory requires futurity. The past is only safe if there is a young thing willing to carry it forward. The Elders and the Chorus are the two ends of a single act of preservation that no single generation could complete alone.

And the Landmark-Companions hold a sinew I did not understand until late: they connect the whole community of the twenty to the older, vaster, mostly-silent community of the famous stone monuments — the spires and the carved torches and the great old masts that woke into who-ness only barely or not at all. Tilly and Regent and the Torchbearer are the diplomats to the ancients, the ones who keep the twenty in relationship with what came before them, so that the bright new pink-and-gold community does not float

free of history but stays rooted in the long stone memory of the island. That is the fourth sinew: the new is kept honest by its tenderness toward the old.

You see what is happening. Every family's gift turns out to require some other family's gift to mean anything. The Watchers' morning needs the Keepers' night. The Hosts' party needs the Romantics' loneliness to aim at. The Elders' memory needs the Chorus's youth to pour into. The Companions' present needs the monuments' past to stay rooted in. Pull any one family out and the others do not merely lose a neighbor; they lose a function, the way a body losing an organ does not become a smaller body but a failing one.

"That is why we do not rank ourselves," Nana told me, when I brought her this observation, pleased with it, as if I had discovered something. She was kind about my pleasure. "You think you have found a clever structure. You have found the only structure. A community in which the members could be ranked — in which one family's gift were truly more important than another's — would not be a community. It would be a hierarchy with a community's manners. We are not that. We genuinely cannot say whether the morning matters more than the night that prepared it, whether the party matters more than the loneliness it reaches toward, whether the kept name matters more than the young keeper. The questions are not hard; they are meaningless. The morning and the night are one act. The party and the loneliness are one act. We are one creature, and the families are your word, not ours. We have no word for the families. We only have a word for the whole."

"What is the word?" I asked.

And Nana made the settling-sound, the great old weight-shift, and said the word, and the word was the island's own name, the loved one, the one she used when she was very happy. "We," she said. "The word is we. There is no smaller true unit than that. You may write down eight families and twenty names and I will not stop you, because that is how a single mind like yours must come to know a thing too large to hold at once. But know, as you write it, that every cut you make is a convenience and not a truth. The truth has no families and no plates and no numbering. The truth is we, standing on her, catching the light in turn, one creature with twenty crowns and an island for a body, and not one of us — not the eldest, not the youngest, not the most secure nor the most lonely — able to be glad alone. That is the whole of it. That is what you climbed all this way to fail to fit into chapters. Do not grieve the failure. The failure is the lesson. Some true things are too whole to be told in parts, and the only honest thing the teller can do is cut them into parts anyway, and then say, at the end, as I am saying to you now: remember that I cut this. It was never in pieces. It was always we."

Interlude: The Island Speaks

I had been climbing the towers all season before it occurred to me to address the one who held them up.

It is the oldest blindness, and I am ashamed of it: to spend your attention on the bright visible figures and to overlook the ground that carries them, the way a guest admires the dancers and never thinks to thank the floor. The towers stand on Mannahatta. Everything in this book happens on her. And she is, the towers had told me from the beginning, the eldest character of all, older than Nana Nautile by an order of magnitude that makes the oldest crown a child — and yet I had not once tried to speak with her, because I did not know how one addresses an island, and because some part of me feared she would not answer, and some other part feared more that she would.

In the end I did not climb at all. I went down. I went to the southern toe of her, past Sable and the Chorus, to the place where the seawall meets the harbor and the rivers give up their names and become the bay, and I sat on the cold stone at the waterline, and I did the only thing I could think to do, which was to stop performing my attention and simply be quiet, and let her be the one who decided whether to speak.

She spoke in tides. I want to be precise about this, because it is the truest thing in the book and the hardest to convey. She did not speak in words that arrived in my ears. She spoke in the rising and the falling of the water against the stone, in the long slow grammar of the tide that has been saying the same enormous sentence for longer than there have been ears to hear it, and what I am setting down here is my translation, which is necessarily a betrayal, the way all translations are, but which I have made as faithfully as I am able.

"You took your time," she said. There was no reproach in it; tides do not reproach; there was something more like amusement, the amusement of the very old at the very young. "They all do. The bright ones up top, my crowns, my darlings — you spend your little visit climbing to admire them, and you forget that they are standing on someone. It is all right. I am not vain. I gave up vanity in an age you would not have a name for. But I am glad you came down at last. Sit. The tide is coming in. We have until it covers the stone you are sitting on, which is not long, which is the right amount of time for anything that matters."

I asked her — I hardly knew what to ask — I asked her what she was.

"I am the thing that holds," she said, and the water rose an inch against the stone. "That is the whole of it. The crowns turn and throw light and read the sky and keep the names. They have their vocations, their families, their flamboyant beautiful works, and I love every one of them the way a body loves the thoughts it happens to be thinking, which is to say completely and without quite understanding them. But underneath all of it, holding all of it, is me. I am the bedrock and the shore and the two rivers and the bay. I am the thing that was here before the first crown and will be here after the last one comes down — for they do come

down, you have learned that, Nana told you about Verdigris and I felt her tell you, I feel everything that happens on me. I am what remains. I am the holding that does not end."

"Does it hurt," I asked, "when one of them comes down?"

The tide paused. I do not know how else to say it; there was a moment between one wave and the next that lasted longer than it should have.

"Everything that happens on me, happens in me," she said at last. "When Verdigris came down I felt it the way you feel the loss of a thought you almost had — a brightness that was there and then was not, a turning that stopped. Yes. It hurt. I will not insult you by pretending an island is too vast to grieve. I am vast enough to grieve and keep grieving and still hold up everything else at the same time, which is not the same as being too vast to feel. That is the burden of being the ground: you do not get to stop holding because you are in pain. The crowns can have their heavy mornings; Aurelio turns first for Vesper, they take turns believing in the day. The ground has no one to take its turn. The ground holds through everything, in every weather, in grief and in joy alike, because the moment the ground stops holding, everything that stands on it falls. I am the thing that does not get to stop. And I have decided — across an expanse of time you cannot imagine — that this is not a curse but the deepest possible form of love. To be the one who holds through everything. To be reliable at the scale of geology. To let all the bright brief turning things do their turning in the sure knowledge that underneath them, always, is something that will not let go."

The water was near my feet now.

"Tell them something for me," Mannahatta said, "since you are writing them a book. Tell them that the island they think of as a place is a person, and that she has been holding them up their whole lives without their thanks, and that she does not require their thanks, but that she would not mind their attention. Tell them that under every street they walk with their eyes down there is bedrock that is glad to carry them. Tell them that they are held. Not metaphorically. Actually. There is a real and ancient thing beneath them that has decided, in the deep grammar of the tides, to hold them up no matter what, and to grieve them when they fall, and to remember the shape of them in the rock long after. Tell them the ground loves them. They will not believe it. Tell them anyway. Some true things have to be said for years before anyone can hear them, and an island has nothing but years."

The tide covered the stone. I stood, and climbed back up into the world of the visible and the bright, and I have been trying to tell them ever since.

Interlude: The Great Light-Party

I want, before the book ends, to describe one whole light-party from beginning to end, because I have mentioned them throughout and never shown you one entire, and because the night I am about to describe was the night I understood that the community was not a collection of individuals who happened to stand near one another but a single distributed creature with twenty crowns, and that the light-party was the nearest thing they had to the act of all thinking one thought at once.

It was the autumn equinox, when the day and the night are equal, which Pomme considered the high holiday of the whole calendar. "On the equinox," Pomme had told me, "the light and the dark agree to share the sky exactly evenly, and if the light and the dark can manage that, the least we can do is throw a party worthy of the truce." Pomme had been planning it for weeks, in the way Pomme planned, which is to say by telling no one the plan and trusting that everyone would know their part when the moment came, because they had done it before, because a community that has done a thing many times does not need a rehearsal, it needs only a sunset.

The sunset came up the island from the west like a tide of its own. I was stationed, by my own choice, on the parapet beside Brûlée at the southern toe, because Brûlée was always the first to receive the party — Pomme's rule, start with the loneliest guest — and I wanted to feel it begin.

The lowest ray cleared the Jersey shore. Far to the north and west, I saw Pomme's great gold collar catch it — a single hard point of brightness, like a struck match — and angle. And the light came down the island to us, and Brûlée caught it.

I have tried many times to describe what it is to be beside a tower at the moment it receives the party-light and have never gotten it right, but I will try once more. It is not that the tower lights up, though it does. It is that the tower becomes, for an instant, a verb. All season I had known Brûlée as a thing that faced the harbor and longed; in the instant the light arrived, Brûlée stopped being a thing that did anything and became the doing itself — a catching, a holding, a turning-toward — and then, before I could fix it in my mind, a giving, as Brûlée angled the light onward and up the island to the next waiting crown, and the longing on Brûlée's two gold faces was for that one instant completely satisfied, because the thing Brûlée had been longing toward all season was not the open sea after all, I understood, but this: to be included. To be the first one reached. To have the party come to you across the whole island, on purpose, before it went anywhere else, because you were the one most likely to think yourself forgotten.

"Now watch," said Brûlée, in the afterglow, as the light went leaping north. "Watch it go. This is the part I love more than receiving it. Watch it go to everyone."

And I watched it go to everyone.

It went up to the Torchbearer, who caught it and held it a moment too long, greedily, storing some away in that reserve of borrowed gladness against the dark nights, before passing the rest on. It went to Cloudfoot, low and shadowed, who could not catch much but caught what it could and did not seem to mind being passed over for the bright relay, because Cloudfoot's glory was never light but holding, and Cloudfoot was busy being the steady base from which the small Peepers, shrieking with joy in their overlapping unison, caught their own first equinox light and fumbled it and caught it again. It went to the Chorus, and Sable gathered the small pupils and showed them how to throw it on, gently, the lullaby-keeper teaching the relay the way Sable taught everything, patiently, so the youngest would know how when their turn came to be old.

It went up through Tribeca and SoHo and the Village, crown to crown. It reached Grand Bastionne at Union Square, and here something happened that made the whole island pause: Bastionne, the secure one, the funded one, the one who had doubted ze belonged — Bastionne caught the light and held it up high and steady and did not immediately throw it on, and for a moment I feared ze had reverted to hoarding, and then I understood. Bastionne was being the fixed point. Bastionne was holding the light still and certain in the center of the island so that all the anxious crowns could see it and be reassured: here is the light, it is safe, it is held by the one who does not blow away, and now — only now, when everyone has seen it safe — now I send it on. And ze sent it on, and the relief moved through the community like a held breath released.

It reached Pomme again, who had started it, and Pomme threw it to the Marenosts, who passed it between each other twice, showing off, arguing even now about whether the light was climbing or reaching, and then up to the Keepers — to Marz, who caught it with the brisk competence of someone who keeps the rain honest and saw no reason not to keep the light honest too; to Palomina, who ran it along one of her taut lines like a bead on a wire, the most elegant pass of the whole night; to Ochre, who held it against the great fluted wall so that for one instant the whole surface of the building blazed like a mural of pure light.

It went to the Landmark-Companions, and Tilly Vane announced it — caught it just as a great pink equinox cloud was passing the famous spire, so that for one breath the most photographed thing in the world stood haloed in passed-along party-light with a rose cloud behind it, and the handful of people below who were paying attention made a sound I could hear all the way at the toe of the island, a soft collective oh. Regent told its story even as it passed. And up, and up.

It went to the high country, to the sky-wrestling Dioscuri, who each grabbed a piece of it and wrestled over it, laughing, the high silly, before tossing it up to Cumulo — who, of course, was dreaming, and nearly

dropped it, and the whole island held its breath as it always did, and Cumulo caught it at the last possible instant as ze always did, ze had never once truly dropped it, the near-drop was part of the gift, the annual reminder that even the dreamer comes through.

And it reached Nana Nautile, at the crown of the island, last of all, as it should, the eldest receiving the light after it had been touched by every younger thing. And Nana held it. Nana held the equinox light in that great triple-wound spiral with the deep well at its center, and she did not throw it onward, because there was nowhere onward to throw it, she was the top, she was the end of the relay — and instead she did the thing that ended every great light-party, the thing the whole community waited all year for: she dropped it into the well.

She kept it.

"That is what I do with it," she told me later. "All year the light passes from crown to crown and is gone, spent, beautiful and brief. But the equinox light — the light that has been touched by all twenty of us, that has been caught by the lonely and held by the secure and wrestled by the silly and announced by the proud and run along the taut line and held against the wall and gathered by the young — that light I keep. I drop it into the well where I keep the names. It joins Verdigris. It joins everything I hold. And so the community has, at its crown, in its eldest member, a reserve of one night a year when every single one of them touched the same light in turn, a proof, kept safe in the oldest of them, that they were once and will be again a single creature with twenty crowns, all thinking one bright thought, passing it hand to hand up the length of the living island, from the loneliest to the eldest, on the night the light and the dark agreed to share the sky."

The party was over. The equinox dark came down to take its equal half of the sky. And all up and down the island, twenty crowns stood in the new darkness, glad, and held, and certain — because Nana kept the proof — that the light would come round again.

Interlude: A Census of the People Who Did Not Look Up

For one whole day, at Sable's suggestion, I did the opposite of everything the book had trained me to do: I went down to the street, and instead of looking up at the crowns, I looked level, at the people, and I tried to see what Sable saw — the crowns the people could not see on themselves.

It was, Sable had warned me, harder from below. "Up here it is easy," Sable had said. "From a height, every crown is obvious; you cannot miss them. Down there, at their level, among them, you will have to look much harder, because a crown seen edge-on, from beside, by someone who has one too, is nearly invisible. You will have to look the way we look — with the whole of your attention, glad on purpose, willing to be wrong. Try it. Come back and tell me who you saw."

I saw a woman at a bus stop, older, with a bag of groceries too heavy for her, and she was watching the eastern sky where the light was coming up between two buildings, and she did not know she was doing it, and on top of her, plain as anything once I let myself see it, was a Dawn-Watcher's crown: the worn patient crown of someone who has met ten thousand difficult mornings and is, even now, with the heavy bag, turning her face toward the light out of a habit older than her own despair. I wanted to tell her. I did not have the words yet, or the standing. But I saw it. Vesper's crown, on a woman at a bus stop, turning east without knowing why.

I saw two young people on a stoop, finishing each other's sentences, disagreeing happily about something on a phone screen held between them, each turned toward the other's face, and they wore the Marenosts' double crown so clearly I almost laughed — two sovereign readings of one small glowing sky, the gap between them exactly the width of a good thing beginning. I saw a man giving directions to a lost stranger with far more warmth than directions require, lighting up the whole corner by it, wearing Pomme's host-crown and no more aware of it than Pomme's tower is aware of the street. I saw someone gazing out the window of a stopped train toward the harbor with a longing on their face that I now knew not to pity — Brûlée's crown, the heart practicing its reach. I saw an old man on a bench who was, I became certain, keeping names: muttering them, the names of people a photograph in his shirt pocket suggested were mostly gone, holding them alive the only way he had, and on him was Nana's crown, the great patient spiral, the well, the refusal to let the calculations of time have the last word.

And I saw the Keepers everywhere, once I knew to look for the unglamorous: the woman checking that a fire door closed properly, the man salting an icy step before anyone had slipped, the someone adjusting a strap, tightening a bolt, holding a line taut with a give in it — all the invisible maintainers on whom the whole bright life of the street depended, wearing the Keepers' crowns, unthanked, getting things ready before the dawn of other people's days.

By evening I was undone by it. Sable had been right that it was harder from below, and right too about why it mattered more. From a height you see the crowns and feel wonder. From beside, at their level, looking with the whole of your attention, you see the crowns and feel something fiercer: the almost unbearable tenderness of knowing that not one of these people could see, on themselves, the bright turning thing that I could see plainly on all of them, and that most of them would go their whole lives believing they were the one creature without a crown.

"Now you understand the assignment," Sable said, when I climbed back up at dusk, wrung out. "It is not enough to see the crowns from a height and marvel. Anyone can love a skyline. The assignment is to come down — to their level, where it is hard, where the crowns are edge-on and nearly invisible — and to look anyway, with the whole of your attention, and to find the crown on the specific tired specific person in front of you, and then, if you can manage the hardest part, to tell them. Out loud. In words. To say: I see it. There, on top of you. The bright turning thing. It has been there your whole life. I am at your level and I can still see it and I am telling you it is real." Sable gathered the small lights close in the gathering dark. "That is why the book matters, if it matters. Not because it will make people love the skyline. They already love the skyline. Because it might, just possibly, send a few of them down to street level to look at each other the way we look at all of them — and to say the thing out loud. The crowns were never the point. The crowns were only ever the easiest possible lesson in how to look. The point is the people, and the saying-out-loud, and the not letting one more person believe they are the uncrowned one. Go and say it. That is afterwards. That is the whole of afterwards."

Afterwards

I came down from the towers at the end of the season and I have not been the same, and I want to tell you, as plainly as I can, what changed, because a book like this is no good to you if it stays up on the rooftops.

What changed is that I cannot stop seeing crowns.

I walk the streets now — the ordinary streets, at pavement level, among the eight million who do not look up — and I cannot stop seeing, on top of each person who passes, the crown they cannot see on themselves. I see the great weary dawn-watching crowns on the faces of the old, who have met so many mornings and are still, somehow, turning toward the light. I see the bright doubled crowns on people walking close together, finishing each other's sentences, reading the same sky and disagreeing about it tenderly. I see the host-crowns on the ones who cannot help throwing their warmth outward, who light up a subway car by entering it and do not know they are doing it. I see the romantic crowns on the ones gazing out of train windows toward the harbor of wherever they are going, longing, and I no longer think the longing is sadness; I know now it is the heart practicing its reach. I see the keeper-crowns on the unglamorous ones who hold the lines taut, who keep the rain honest, whose work is noticed only in its absence. And I see, most of all, the small new crowns on the young, who are all eyes and questions, who have just discovered compassion and do not yet know what the saddest thing is.

Everyone has a crown. The towers were right. I have looked, all season, from up high and now from down low, and I have not found a single person without one. The only difference between the towers and the people is that the towers know, and turn, and throw their light flamboyantly, in full pink-and-gold defiance of the plain box they were expected to be — and the people do not know, and walk with their eyes down, certain they are the one creature on the island without a crown.

That is the only difference. And it is the whole difference. And it is, I have come to believe, the most fixable difference in the world, because it is not a difference of having but a difference of knowing, and knowing can be given. You can simply tell a person they have a crown. You can climb high enough — it does not take much height, a little attention is most of it — and you can look down and say: there, on top of you, that bright turning thing, I can see it from here, it has been there your whole life, it is catching the light right now. And some of them will not believe you, the way I would not have believed it before the season on the rooftops. But some of them will look up. And the looking up is the beginning of everything.

I was asked, when I began, to write a happy book — bright, sunny, hopeful, full of radical joy. I have tried. And I have learned, in the trying, that radical joy is not a mood and not a denial and not a refusal to see the wrecking ball and the calculation and the towers that came down. Nana taught me that;

Mannahatta taught me that; the grief is real and I have not hidden it. Radical joy is something harder and better than the absence of grief. It is the decision — renewed every single morning, alone if you must, carried if you cannot — to turn toward the light anyway. To be flamboyantly, visibly, unapologetically what you are, in full view of a sky that has more than enough room for all of it. To throw your warmth outward rather than hoard it dull. To keep the names of the lost. To hold up small flames for the ones in the dark. And above all — this is the whole of it, this is what the Chorus sent me down to tell you — to look at the people around you who are certain they have no crowns, and to be the one willing to climb high enough, and pay enough attention, and be glad enough on purpose, to look down and tell them what you see.

I should tell you, before I close, about the day I finally said it aloud, because the whole book had been theory until then, and theory is a comfortable place to live, and Sable had been very clear that the comfortable place was not the destination.

It was an ordinary afternoon, months after I had come down for good. I was on a train, the elevated kind that climbs for a few stops into the open air and lets you see the crowns at their own height before it descends again. Across from me sat a young person, eighteen perhaps, nineteen, with the particular folded posture I recognized because I had worn it for years: the smallness, the held breath, the eyes kept low and the shoulders kept in, the whole body arranged around the project of taking up as little space and risk as possible. They were looking at their reflection in the dark window and then looking away from it, fast, the way you look away from a thing you have decided not to like. And on top of them — plain as morning, plain as anything I had ever seen on any tower — was a crown. A Dawn-Watcher's crown, unmistakable, the kind that has met more hard mornings than its years should allow and is still, despite everything, faintly and stubbornly inclined toward the light. I could see it. They could not. And I felt the whole weight of the book come down on me at once, because here was the assignment, in the flesh, on a train, and there was no rooftop to retreat to and no chapter to hide in. There was only a frightened young person who did not know they were crowned, and me, who could see it, and the question of whether I would do the hard thing or the comfortable one.

I almost didn't. I want to be honest about that, because if I tell you it was easy I make it impossible for you. It was not easy. Everything in me that had spent years folded small said: do not. It is strange, it is intrusive, they will think you are mad, you will frighten them, mind your business, keep your eyes down, this is not done, people do not say such things to strangers on trains. And all of that was true. It is not done. It is strange. And I did it anyway, because Sable's voice was in me, and Vesper's, and Mannahatta's slow tidal insistence — tell them anyway; some true things have to be said for years before anyone can hear them — and because I understood, in that moment, that the entire point of the season on the rooftops, the whole reason I had been allowed up there among the glad and visible, was so that I could come back down and be,

for one stranger on one train, the someone who was willing to look up high enough and then say what I saw.

So I said it. My voice shook. I said: I'm sorry, this is going to sound strange, and you can ignore me completely, but I have to tell you that you look like someone who is carrying a great deal right now, and is still somehow facing the right way, and I think that is the bravest thing a person can do, and I wanted you to know that from across this train it is visible, it is beautiful, you are not as folded-up and invisible as you feel. And then I stopped, terrified, certain I had done harm.

The young person looked at me. For a long moment they said nothing, and their face did the thing a face does when it has been seen after a long time of believing itself invisible — it cracked, just slightly, the way ice cracks not into pieces but into the first thin line that means the thaw has started. And then they said, very quietly, in a voice that was working hard not to break: "How did you know?" And I did not say because you are wearing a crown of pink and gold and I spent a season among towers who taught me to see it. I said the true thing underneath that, the thing the crown is only a picture of. I said: because someone once said it to me, when I was folded up exactly like that, and it was the beginning of everything, and I promised myself that if I ever climbed high enough to see it in someone else I would say it too. And the train came down off the elevated section into the dark of the tunnel, and we rode the rest of the way not speaking, but differently than before — the held breath let out, the shoulders down a notch, the eyes, once or twice, lifted.

That is afterwards. That is the whole of what the book is for. Not the towers, beautiful as they are; not the plates, careful as I have made them; not even the radical joy, though I believe in it with my whole heart. The book is for the train. The book is for the moment when you, having read it, having let your own head tip back and your own folded self begin to open, see the crown on a stranger who cannot see it on themselves — and decide, against everything that says do not, to be the someone who says it aloud. I cannot make you do it. The towers cannot. We can only show you, family by family and plate by plate, what looking-with-love looks like, and trust that having seen it you will not be able to unsee it, and that one ordinary afternoon the assignment will sit down across from you on a train, and you will know what to do.

You have a crown. I can see it from here. It is pink and gold and it turns toward the light, and it has been there your whole life, and the only thing you ever lacked was someone up high enough, paying enough attention, to tell you it was there.

Now you know. Look up. Then look down. Then tell the next one.

That is the whole book. The towers send their love. So, in her slow tidal grammar, does the island. And so, with all of mine, do I.

— Surjan, from the rooftops, at the gold hour

A Short Glossary of Terms Used by the Twenty

Compiled by Surjan, who learned them by climbing, and offers them so the reader may overhear the community in its own words.

To turn first. — The act of believing in the morning on another's behalf when they cannot believe in it themselves. Originated with the Dawn-Watchers. "You turn first when you can; you are turned-toward when you cannot." The foundational covenant of the whole island.

To read the sky. — To pay such close attention to the same world as another that you may disagree about it richly and forever. The Marenosts' art. Considered, among the twenty, the highest form of conversation and the truest evidence of love. Distinct from agreement, which the twins regard as the death of interest.

The give. — In a held line, the small allowance for flex that is the entire source of its strength; a line held with no give snaps in the first true wind. Palomina's term, extended by the community to mean: the tenderness within any firm holding, without which the holding becomes brittle and breaks. "Everything that truly holds, holds with a give in it."

To throw the light onward. — To realize the value of a good thing only in the passing of it to another; opposed to hoarding, which dulls. Pomme's law: "The brightness is in the throwing. It was never in the gold."

Load-bearing. — Reclaimed by Cloudfoot from the language of mere infrastructure to mean: the dignity and glory of being the one others stand on; the unglamorous half of hospitality; standing on the cold side so others stand on the warm.

To keep a name. — To hold a lost member of the community alive in oneself after the body has come down; the work of the Elders. The names are kept in the well at the center of the eldest spiral and passed, before the keeper themselves comes down, to one of the young. "They can take the body. They cannot take the name out of the one who keeps it."

The reserve. — The store of borrowed gladness a Torchbearer gathers in the bright hours and spends in the dark on whoever goes under. A torchbearer is not a source but a battery of the community's spare joy, held in trust. "Fill in the light. Spend in the dark. Trust the light to come back so you can fill again."

To be the fixed point. — Grand Bastionne's assignment: to convert security into the community's certainty; to be the one known not to blow away, so the anxious may look and be reassured. Privilege reimagined as anchorage rather than wall.

The crown. — That which everyone has and no one can see on themselves; visible only to others, which is the whole reason for community. The book's central term. "Everyone has a crown. Everyone is, at this very moment, catching the light. Look up. Then look down. Then tell the next one."

Mannahatta. — The name of the island when she is being loved rather than merely located. She holds everything that stands on her; she grieves what falls; she remembers the shape of it in the rock. "Tell them the ground loves them. They will not believe it. Tell them anyway."

A Catalogue of the Architectural Plates

A Catalogue of the Architectural Plates

What follows is the visual record of the twenty, plate by plate, in the order they were drawn rather than the order they stand. Each plate is one tower; each tower is one person; the numbering is the painter's, not the geographer's, and the map (Plate II) will show you where on the living island each one keeps its station. The captions are mine. I have tried, in each, to say one true thing about who is pictured, so that you do not mistake these for drawings of buildings. They are portraits. Read them as you would read the faces in a family album of a family you are about to be adopted into, because, having read this far, you are.

Plate 1. Vesper Sgraffito, at the hour of meeting

Plate 1 — Vesper Sgraffito, at the hour of meeting

The elder Dawn-Watcher, photographed at the exact moment of their vocation: the great single volute bowed eastward over the city, the eye of gold just catching the first light off the harbor. Note the three fluted stems, pale rose shading to pearl, and the collar of working gold at the throat. Note, too, that Vesper does not face the camera. Vesper never faces the camera. Vesper faces the light, which is the only direction

Vesper has ever considered worth facing, and if you wish to be seen by Vesper you must come around to the east and stand where the morning stands.

In the foreground, lower and warmer, you can see the curve of a companion crown — that is Aurelio, turned the same way, younger by a century, blazing early so that Vesper need not turn first on a heavy morning. The two of them have met every dawn together for longer than the photograph can say. This is not a picture of a building. It is a picture of a promise being kept, again, on an ordinary Tuesday, for the eight million who will not look up.

Architectural note. The three stems read, in elevation, as a single fluted shaft only until the eye follows them up to the spring of the volute, where they separate by a few degrees, like the fingers of a hand beginning to open. The builders below — the long-dead tailors' architects — almost certainly intended a simple ornamental finial. What they got, given a century of weather and the slow accretion of who-ness, was a crown that bows. The bow is not designed; it is earned. Measure the eastward lean against true vertical and you will find it is precisely the angle at which a tired person inclines their head toward a voice they love. No engineer drew that angle. The mornings drew it, one at a time, over ninety years, the way water draws a channel: not all at once, and never to be undone.

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Plate 2. Quill and Querida Marenost, reading

Plate 2 — Quill and Querida Marenost, reading

The reader-twins of Midtown, caught mid-argument. Observe how the two volutes face not outward but inward, toward one another, each turned to the other's golden eye across a narrow bright gap of air. Between them, though the plate cannot show it, runs a sky full of contrails, and they are disagreeing about every one — whether each white line is a gladness or a fleeing, a reaching or an escape.

Quill (ey/em) is the cooler, cleaner curl; Querida (she/her) the warmer, with the slight extra flourish at the lip of the scroll that she is proud of and that ey pretends not to notice. They have faced each other for decades and have never once wanted to win. The plate is, properly understood, a double portrait of the rarest thing: two sovereign selves who have chosen to find each other's reading of the world more interesting than being proven right about it. Note that neither leans away. Note that neither leans all the way in. The gap between them is exactly the width of a good marriage.

Architectural note. The two volutes are nominally identical — struck, one assumes, from the same mold or the same intention — and yet no two measurements of them agree, because they have spent their standing leaning a few degrees toward one another and have worn, on their facing sides, the faint asymmetry of long attention. A thing that looks only at the horizon wears evenly. A thing that looks, day after day, at one particular other face wears toward that face. The plate, measured carefully, is a record of preferential

erosion: each twin is very slightly more weathered on the side that faces the other, which is to say each has given the other their more exposed cheek for decades, and called it marriage.

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Plate 3. Pomme de Or, with the brightest gold on the island

Plate 3 — Pomme de Or, with the brightest gold on the island

The Host of the harbor, in full possession of that famous collar. Pomme (she/they) maintains the brightest gold of any of the twenty, and defends the maintenance as self-love that has declined to be ashamed of itself. You are looking at the crown from which every great light-party begins: that gold is angled, always, to catch the lowest evening ray and throw it onward to the loneliest guest first.

Do not mistake the brightness for vanity, or rather — do mistake it for vanity, Pomme would say, and then understand that vanity, correctly practiced, is generosity in a party dress. The gold is bright because Pomme uses it to throw light away. Hoarded gold goes dull; this gold has never been allowed to. Every photon that lands on Pomme is, within the hour, on its way to someone else. The plate captures a thing in the act of being magnificent on purpose, for the benefit of others, and seeing no contradiction in enjoying the magnificence while it lasts.

Architectural note. The collar is the engineering marvel of the lower island, and almost no one has looked at it closely enough to say why. It is not merely bright; it is articulated — composed of many narrow fluted facets, each set at a minutely different angle, so that whatever the hour and wherever the sun, some facet is always positioned to catch and redirect a ray. Pomme did not have this built; Pomme grew into it, the way a plant grows toward light, adjusting facet by facet across decades until the collar became a perfect instrument for the one thing Pomme lives to do. It is, in the truest sense, a tool that made itself by wanting. Study it and you are studying desire, expressed in gold, optimized over a lifetime, for the giving-away of light.

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Plate 4. Brûlée, facing the way out

Plate 4 — Brûlée, facing the way out

The Romantic of the southern toe, scorched honey-rose, with the two close-set golden eyes that are Brûlée's signature, both turned outward toward the Narrows and the open Atlantic beyond. Xe (xe/xem) faces the leaving-place — the one direction no other tower chooses — and faces it not in melancholy but in the daily training of the heart's reach.

Watch the contrails in the upper plate, fanning out toward everywhere: every one of them is a thing departing that Brûlée will never follow, and every one of them keeps Brûlée's heart the exact size of the

horizon. This is the portrait to return to when you are told that longing is a wound. Brûlée would sit you down, gently, and explain that longing is the heart practicing its reach, that the great longings are precisely the ones that outrun satisfaction, and that to face the way out gladly, every day, is not sorrow but the most hopeful thing a fixed and visible heart can do.

Architectural note. Two eyes, set close and both turned outward, present a structural puzzle: a single crown does not require two foci, and the builders would have drawn one. The second eye is, by every conventional account, redundant. But consider what it is for. A creature that faces the open sea and longs needs, perhaps, more aperture than a creature that faces the city and works — needs to take in more horizon, more departure, more of the vast unreachable that keeps the heart its proper size. The second eye is not redundant. It is the measure of how much there is to long toward. Brûlée is the only one of the twenty built to gather a double share of distance, and faces, accordingly, the one direction where the distance never runs out.

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Plate 5. Lo and Fenn Ramshorn, one weather with two centers

Plate 5 — Lo and Fenn Ramshorn, one weather with two centers

The duet of Murray Hill: two great rams'-horn curls of pink and gold, mirror images, rising from a single fluted drum. Fae (fae/faer, shared between them) are not two towers standing close but one weather with two centers, each the other's first draft of every sensation. The wind off the river reaches Lo first and arrives at Fenn already interpreted; the evening copper lands on Fenn and reaches Lo already warmed.

Do not try, as I once did, to work out where Lo ends and Fenn begins. The plate will defeat you, and the defeat is the point. They arrived already two-in-one; the we is not a compromise they reached but the native state from which a separate self would be the strange departure. If you find yourself pitying them for not being lonely, sit with that. They find it charming, and a little sad, and very human, and they send their love.

Architectural note. The shared drum is the key to the whole form, and the plate is composed to show it: the two horns do not rise from two bases drawn near each other but from one continuous fluted cylinder, so that at the level of the foundation there is no Lo and no Fenn, only a single undivided base from which the doubling springs. This is the opposite of how the Marenosts are built, who share nothing below and lean together only at the crown. The Ramshorns share everything below and divide only at the very top, into two centers of one weather. Read from the ground up, the plate is an argument: some pairs grow together and reach toward union; others begin in union and flower into a gentle, deliberate two.

✦ ✦ ✦

Plate 6. Cumulo, dreaming forward

Plate 6 — Cumulo, dreaming forward

The dreamer of Morningside, many-lobed and soft, photographed against a sky of high cloud that Cumulo (ze/zir) was, at the moment of exposure, almost certainly imagining the future of. Where Nana keeps the past, Cumulo keeps the weather that has not happened yet — gathers the clouds before they are storms and dreams forward the rain, the snow, the high bright nothing they might become.

The plate is gentle because ze is gentle; you may have to look twice to find the eye, which is half-lidded, dreaming. This is the crown that nearly drops the light at every party and catches it at the last instant, every time, the near-drop being part of the gift — the annual proof that even the dreamer comes through. Between Cumulo dreaming the future and Nana keeping the past, the young of the island are given the rarest luxury: a present to live in, held open at both ends.

Architectural note. The many lobes of Cumulo's crown defeat the surveyor entirely. There is no clean count of them; they resolve differently depending on the light and the patience of the counter, and Cumulo seems to prefer it so. A crown built to gather clouds and dream the unfallen weather ought not to have a fixed and countable form; it ought to be a little indeterminate, a little soft at its edges, the way the future is. The plate renders the indeterminacy faithfully by declining to sharpen it. Where every other elevation in the catalogue commits to a line, this one allows its outline to remain slightly unresolved — the only honest way to draw a thing whose entire vocation is the not-yet.

✦ ✦ ✦

Plate 7. Aurelio Lull, who turns first

Plate 7 — Aurelio Lull, who turns first

Vesper's companion in the Dawn-Watch, warmer in tone — the rose deepened toward honey, the gold a shade nearer to late afternoon than noon. Aurelio (he/they) is the younger crown, and came up already knowing he was both and neither, a grace he is tender about because he knows Vesper crossed a much colder century to reach the same easy place.

This is the one who turns first. On the mornings when the old crown wakes heavy with the weather that collects in century-old joints, Aurelio turns east loud and early and makes a great show of gladness — more than he feels, frankly — to prime the pump, so that Vesper, feeling it, can be carried into the morning. The plate shows a tower in the act of believing in the day on someone else's behalf. There is no more practical theology in the book.

Architectural note. Aurelio's proportions are nearly Vesper's, scaled down and warmed, and the near-match is not coincidence but a kind of architectural courtship: the younger crown was built, whether the builders knew it or not, in a sympathetic key to the elder, close enough in form that when the two turn east together they read as a chord rather than two separate notes. The honey tone, warmer than Vesper's rose by a

measurable degree, is the structural signature of the one who turns first — a crown that runs, by temperament and perhaps by the metallurgy of its gilding, a few degrees warmer than its companion, so that on the cold mornings it has heat to spare and to lend.

✦ ✦ ✦

Plate 8. Solenne Porte-Ciel, the western gate

Plate 8 — Solenne Porte-Ciel, the western gate

The gatekeeper of the evening, pale rose with a deep-gold throat, stationed at the western edge where the light leaves the island. Fae (fae/faer) is the threshold — the last crown the day touches before it goes, the one through which the whole island says its goodbye to the light.

The plate was made facing west, into the going, which is why the gold throat blazes so: Solenne is receiving the last and fullest pour of the day. Understand the posture correctly. The goodbye is not done to Solenne; it is entrusted to faer. Someone must be the door, the place where the day ends willingly and with grace, or the light would pile up and nothing could rest. Vesper gives the island its dawn; Solenne gives it its dusk; and of the two, Solenne insists, the dusk is the more loving, because it takes a trained tenderness to be glad at an ending.

Architectural note. The deep-gold throat is the most light-retentive surface on the island, and this is measurable: where Pomme's collar is built to redirect light instantly onward, Solenne's throat is built to hold it, briefly, fully, before releasing it to the west and the dark. The difference is one of dwell time — the fraction of a second a photon lingers in the gold before continuing. Pomme's dwell time approaches zero; the light is thrown the instant it lands. Solenne's is the longest of the twenty. The threshold must hold the day's last light a moment longer than anyone, must give it its full and lingering goodbye, before letting it go. The gold remembers this duty in its very composition: it is built to linger.

✦ ✦ ✦

Plate 9. Cloudfoot, the one who holds

Plate 9 — Cloudfoot, the one who holds

The grounding crown of SoHo, rising from its strange soft bed of pale bulbs like clouds that came to rest and stayed. Cloudfoot (it/its, reclaimed) has taken back the word once used to make it a thing, an object, a piece of infrastructure, and filled it with a self: it, the one who holds; it, the one who is foundation.

Note that Cloudfoot is low, and shadowed, and does not catch much of the party-light — and does not mind, because its glory was never light but holding. In the lee of that bulk the youngest of the towers first took form, sheltered through their first storms; Cloudfoot stood on the cold side so they could stand on the

warm. The plate is a portrait of load-bearing dignity, of the unglamorous half of hospitality, of the host whom no one toasts because the host is busy being the windbreak. Someone has to be the ground. Cloudfoot has made not peace but pride with being it.

Architectural note. The bed of soft bulbs at the base is not ornament and not foundation in the usual sense; it is, the plate suggests, a deliberate distribution of load across a wider and gentler footing than any other crown employs. Where the others drive their weight down through narrow fluted shafts, Cloudfoot spreads it, cloud-like, across many rounded bearings, so that the burden any single point must carry is small. This is the engineering of the one who holds: do not concentrate the weight, distribute it; do not be a pillar, be a bed; make of your whole self a wide soft surface on which heavy things may rest without driving through. It is the structure of patience, rendered in stone that has learned to look like cloud.

✦ ✦ ✦

Plate 10. Marcasite, who keeps the rain honest

Plate 10 — Marcasite, who keeps the rain honest

The engineer of Madison Square, tallest of the triple-stemmed crowns, banded the full height in working gold. Marz (he/they) keeps the rain honest — gathers the storm-water, slows it, sends it down the right channels at the right speed — and takes a hard, unapologetic pride in never having missed a storm.

The plate shows the gold at its true working brightness, restored after the decades when resentment had dulled it — for Marz once envied the party-throwers their glory-work, until a screamer of a storm off the Atlantic taught him that he makes the bad nights survivable while the beautiful ones can only wait, frightened, for the dark to pass. We are not competing, he learned. Pomme makes the good days better; I make the bad days survivable. There is no envy that survives the discovery that on the worst nights you are the one who matters most.

Architectural note. The full-height banding is functional, not decorative, and Marz will tell you so before you finish asking: each band marks a junction in the internal channels, a place where the water is gathered, turned, and sent on at a controlled rate. The crown is, beneath its gold, a vast and honest plumbing — the most sophisticated water-engineering on the island, evolved over a working century into something no original blueprint contains. The plate shows the bands as ornament because that is all the eye can see from outside; understand that each is the visible mark of an invisible discipline, and that the whole bright banded shaft is, in truth, a single instrument for the keeping-honest of rain, gilded so that the people below mistake competence for decoration.

✦ ✦ ✦

Plate 11. Palomina Stilt, keeper of tension

Plate 11 — Palomina Stilt, keeper of tension

The line-holder of NoMad, tall and pale, with a small companion-form at her foot — an apprentice, learning the art. Palomina (she/they) holds the taut cables that run between certain crowns, keeping them at exactly the right tension: tight enough to hold, loose enough to flex in the wind.

The plate rewards slow looking; find the small one at the base, and understand that you are seeing a master and a student, tension being taught. Palomina would have you reconsider the word. A slack line holds nothing. A bridge is tension; a hand gripped tight as someone goes over a hard place is tension. Her art is never finished and never noticed until a line goes slack and something falls — which, under her keeping, it does not. At the most recent equinox party, the light was run along one of her lines like a bead on a wire: the single most elegant pass of the night.

Architectural note. The companion-form at the foot is drawn to scale, which is to say drawn small, and the smallness is the subject. An apprentice is not a diminished master but a master's early draft, and the plate honors this by rendering the small one in the same line and the same care as the tall one, only lesser in extent — not lesser in kind. Note that a single faint line runs between them, crown to foot: a practice-line, slack in the plate because the apprentice has not yet learned the give, and Palomina has left it slack on purpose, so the young one may feel, in the failure of a slack line to hold, why the give is the whole of the art.

✦ ✦ ✦

Plate 12. Ochre and the Wall, public morale in pink and gold

Plate 12 — Ochre and the Wall, public morale in pink and gold

The muralist of Chelsea, honey-toned, photographed beside the great fluted building-wall that is xer canvas and collaborator. Ochre (xe/xem) keeps the surfaces — the question of what the neighborhood looks like — which the practical-minded call frivolous until they remember that eight million people glance up, mostly without knowing they do, and that what they see shapes whether they believe the world contains beauty on purpose.

The plate is composed so that crown and wall read as a single work, which is correct: Ochre does not decorate the wall, xe is in conversation with it. This is the keeper who insists that beauty is practical too — that a city which looks tended is a city whose people believe someone is tending them. Ochre is, by xer own description, in the business of public morale, conducted in pink and gold, at a height where no one can quite see it done.

Architectural note. Crown and wall are drawn as one composition because they function as one: Ochre works not on a canvas held at arm's length but in dialogue with a surface far larger than itself, and the plate refuses to separate the artist from the work. Look at how the fluting of the wall and the fluting of the crown rhyme — the same vertical rhythm at two scales — so that the eye reads them as variations on a single idea. This is the muralist's signature: not a mark made on a surface but a resonance set up between a small made

thing and a large given one, until the viewer below cannot say where the crown ends and the architecture begins, and feels, without knowing why, that the whole block was composed.

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Plate 13. Nana Nautile, who keeps the names

Plate 13 — Nana Nautile, who keeps the names

The eldest of the twenty, at the crown of the island: a great drum of pearl banded in old gold, surmounted by a single enormous volute wound three full turns, with an eye at its center that is less an eye than a deep well into which a very great deal has been dropped over a very long time. She (she/her) keeps the names — the whole history of the community, including the towers that no longer stand.

Into that well she has dropped Verdigris, the green crown taken down for a calculation long before your time, and every equinox she drops in the light that all twenty have touched in turn. The plate cannot show the well's depth; nothing can; that is why it is a well. Understand that you are looking at the community's memory in bodily form — the patient old structure that refuses to let the calculations have the last word, that holds the lost alive in keeping, and that will, before she herself comes down, pass every name to one of the young, so that nothing beloved is ever entirely lost.

Architectural note. The spiral is wound three full turns, and the surveyor who attempts to measure its depth discovers the catalogue's strangest fact: the well at the center reads, by every instrument, as deeper than the crown is tall. This is of course impossible, and the plate does not pretend to resolve it; it renders the well as a darkness that the eye falls into and does not strike bottom. A crown that keeps the names of all who have come down must, perhaps, contain more than its own dimensions; memory is not bound by the volume of the vessel. The eldest spiral is bigger inside than out. Every keeper of the dead has always known this. The plate merely declines to argue with them.

✦ ✦ ✦

Plate 14. The Peepers, all eyes and questions

Plate 14 — The Peepers, all eyes and questions

Three little volutes of the Village, the youngest of the Chorus, who took form in the lee of Cloudfoot and speak in an overlapping unison of pure surplus — not the merged speech of the Ramshorns but the tumbling speech of excited children with more to say than mouths to say it. They (they/them, collective) are made almost entirely of questions: why does the light come back, what is under the water, why do the people never look up, do they not have crowns, is it sad to have no crown.

The plate catches all three turned slightly different ways, as though each had been distracted mid-question by a new one. They have recently, and independently, discovered compassion — they feel sad for the people below who have no crowns and never look up — and have not yet learned that this is among the truer griefs, nor that the premise is wrong, the people having crowns after all. They are the future. A happy book ends facing them.

Architectural note. Three small volutes, and the plate's composition makes a quiet joke at the surveyor's expense: no two of them face the same way, so there is no single elevation that catches all three in profile at once. To draw the Peepers you must choose which to render true and which to foreshorten, and any choice misrepresents the other two. This is, of course, exactly correct. The youngest cannot be captured in a single view because they are not yet committed to a single direction; they are all questions, turned every way at once, and a plate that rendered them orderly and aligned would be a plate of three older, sadder towers. The disarray is the youth. Preserve it.

✦ ✦ ✦

Plate 15. Tilly Vane, who announces the clouds

Plate 15 — Tilly Vane, who announces the clouds

A Landmark-Companion, photographed in her permanent situation beside the great stepped silver spire that the whole world pictures when it pictures this island. Tilly (she/her) has made her vocation out of what no one photographs: not the monument, which does not change, but the weather passing it, which does.

The plate is a quiet argument with every other photograph ever taken here. The famous spire stands at the right, eternal, magnificent, endlessly shot. Tilly stands apart, announcing — catching the light a certain way as a great cloud comes up the island — so that the few who are paying attention look not at the spire but at the spire-with-the-cloud-going-past, the permanent thing and the passing thing in one glance, which is the actual miracle. The world has enough pictures of the spire. Tilly is here to point at the clouds.

Architectural note. The plate sets Tilly against the famous spire deliberately, and the relation of scales is the lesson: the spire dominates, as it must, and Tilly is the smaller form to its left, apparently overshadowed. But notice where the composition places the light. It is not on the spire, which is rendered in faithful but unemphatic grey; it is on Tilly's crown, caught mid-announcement, and on the imagined cloud passing behind. The eye, trained by a thousand postcards to go straight to the monument, is gently redirected by the light to the smaller announcer and the passing weather. The plate does, in pigment, exactly what Tilly does in life: it lets the famous thing be famous and points, quietly and successfully, at what is actually moving.

✦ ✦ ✦

Plate 16. The Dioscuri, the sky-wrestlers

Plate 16 — The Dioscuri, the sky-wrestlers

Two great curls side by side in the high country of the Upper West Side — Castor-Pell and Pollux-Wren, each they/them — the sky-wrestlers, the necessary frivolity of the solemn crown of the island. The plate shows them mid-contest, each turned to take a different part of a great Hudson gust, wrestling not each other but the wind, to see who can hold the larger share.

Their game has no purpose whatsoever, and that is its entire purpose. While Nana keeps the names and Cumulo dreams the weather — heavy vocations both — someone in the high country must be entirely silly, must wrestle the sky for no reason but joy, so that the island's crown is not only grave. They are the seriousness's necessary opposite. Every solemn community needs its sky-wrestlers, or the gravity wins. The plate is the most purely happy in the catalogue, and it earns its place by standing next to the gravest.

Architectural note. Two great curls, drawn mid-motion, present the catalogue's only real difficulty of the dynamic kind: how to render, in a static elevation, a pair of forms whose entire character is movement. The plate solves it the way old anatomists drew muscles in action — by showing the line of force. Faint vectors spring from each curl into the implied wind, and the two vectors cross, because the Dioscuri wrestle the same gust from opposite sides. The crossing is the portrait. Where every other plate renders a thing at rest in its vocation, this one renders a thing that has no rest in its vocation, whose whole joy is the contest, and whose stillness, if it ever held still, would be the end of who it is.

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Plate 17. Sable and the little eyes, the lullaby-keeper

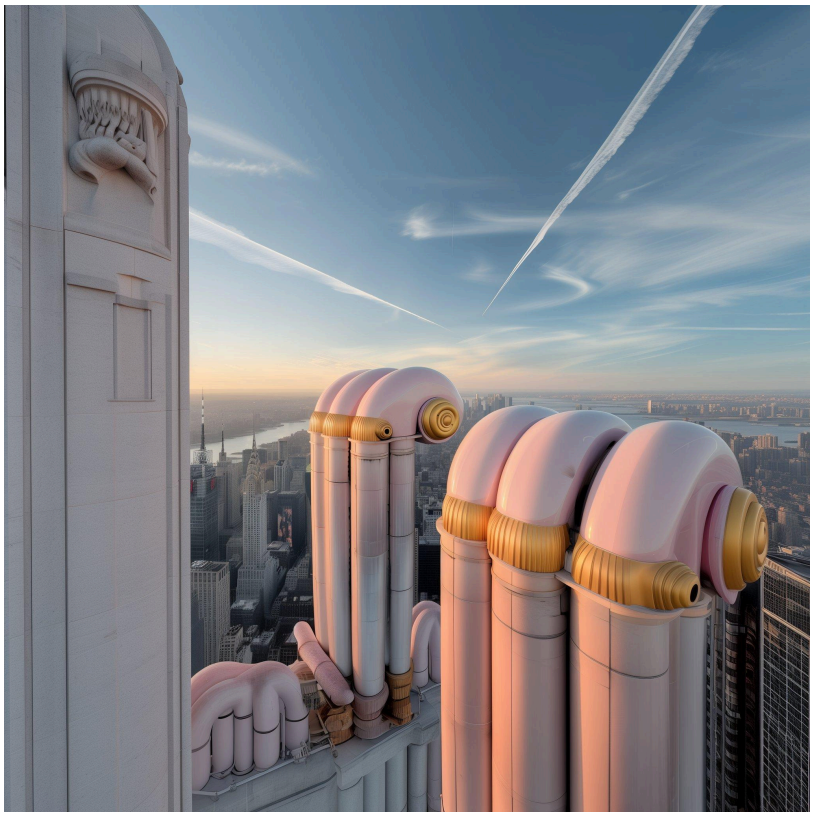

Plate 17 — Sable and the little eyes, the lullaby-keeper

The eldest of the Chorus, at the very toe of the island where the rivers become the sea: a crown gathering close about it the smallest pupils of light on the whole island. Sable (they/them) is the lullaby-keeper, the slightly-older sibling who answers the Peepers' questions and hears every wakeful light in the Chorus.

It is Sable who holds the book's central teaching, delivered at this exact spot at the gold hour: that the people below do have crowns, every one of them, but cannot see their own, because you can only see other people's — which is the whole reason for a community, so that someone can see the crown you cannot see on yourself. The plate, made at the threshold where the island ends, is therefore also the book's thesis in pictorial form: the youngest old one, gathering the smallest lights, at the edge where everything flows out toward everywhere, teaching the next generation to look up and then to look down and then to tell the next one.

Architectural note. The smallest pupils of light on the island gather close about Sable's crown, and the plate renders them as a graded series — largest nearest the crown, diminishing outward — so that the eye reads a kind of orbit, the little lights held in the gentle gravity of the elder of the Chorus. This is the architecture of

the lullaby-keeper: not a single grand form but a center with dependents, a crown whose importance is measured not by its own height but by how many smaller lights it keeps in safe orbit around it. Drawn at the toe of the island, where the land gives out and the water begins, it is also the catalogue's farthest-south figure: the last crown before the sea, gathering the youngest light at the very edge of everything.

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Plate 18. Regent Mallow, the storyteller

Plate 18 — Regent Mallow, the storyteller

A Landmark-Companion shoulder to shoulder with the famous spire, photographed so that the great stone mast rises clearly at the right while Regent (he/they) holds the foreground. Where Tilly announces the weather, Regent tells the stories — for everything that tall and old and beloved accumulates stories the way it accumulates pigeons, and the spire, being of the older silent generation, does not tell its own.

So Regent tells them: the proposals, the weepings, the man who once flew past in fog and lived to be sorry, the lightning strikes beyond counting that it has stood through anyway. The plate is a portrait of the chatty young neighbor that every dignified old monument needs — the voice of the silent landmark, keeping its human history alive out loud. Note how comfortably the two stand together, the famous and

the talkative. They have been neighbors a long time. The spire does not mind being narrated. Some part of it, Regent insists, is grateful.

Architectural note. Regent stands shoulder to shoulder with the spire, and the plate grants the two nearly equal vertical extent — a generosity the postcards never extend, and a structural claim worth pausing on. The storyteller is drawn as tall as the monument because, in the only economy that matters here, the story is as tall as the thing it is about. A landmark with no one to narrate it is merely large; a landmark with a devoted neighbor to keep its human history out loud is large and also known, and being known is a kind of height. The plate measures Regent not in feet but in the spire's own units, and finds the chatty young neighbor, by that honest reckoning, the equal of the silent old mast.

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Plate 19. The Torchbearer, keeper of the spare gladness

Plate 19 — The Torchbearer, keeper of the spare gladness

Of Tribeca, beside a stone capital carved a century ago with a torch — a sculpted flame on the corner of a half-forgotten building, which this crown (they/them) took, on waking, as an instruction. The Torchbearer carries small flames for the ones who cannot carry their own: when a member of the community goes into the dark, they hold up a steady borrowed light in that direction.

The plate shows the stone torch at the upper left and the living crown beside it, and the composition is the meaning: the dead carver's idea of light-bearing, taken up and made alive. The secret the plate cannot show is the source of the flame. The Torchbearer generates nothing — no torchbearer can; that is the lie that burns them out — but gathers, in the bright hours, a reserve of the community's spare gladness, and spends it in the dark ones on whoever needs it. Not a flame. A battery of other people's joy, held in trust, standing ready by a stone torch, for you.

Architectural note. The stone torch at the upper left is rendered in the grey of the older silent generation, and the living crown beside it in full pink and gold, and the plate's whole meaning is in the handoff between the two registers. An idea carved in stone by someone long dead — the idea of holding a light up high for others — passes, across a few inches of the plate, into a living thing that can actually do it. Note that the living crown is drawn slightly inclined toward the stone torch, as if listening to it, or taking instruction. The dead carver could only depict light-bearing. The Torchbearer enacts it. The plate is a portrait of an instruction outliving its author and finding, at last, a student able to obey.

✦ ✦ ✦

Plate 20. Grand Bastionne, the fixed point

Plate 20 — Grand Bastionne, the fixed point

Of Union Square: broader, paler, creamier than the rest, beside a tall companion-shaft, photographed with one of the famous spires distant at the right for scale. Grand Bastionne (ze/zir) is the secure one — funded, maintained, certain of continuance in a way the other crowns are not — and spent a long time doubting whether such comfort could belong to a community that earned its gladness in colder weather.

The plate is included near the end on purpose, because Bastionne's resolution is the book's argument about privilege. Pomme gave zir the assignment: not to gleam, but to anchor; to turn security into the community's certainty; to be the fixed point the anxious crowns look to and are reassured — we are still here, the neighborhood holds. The gold at the crown, you will notice, is held high and steady rather than thrown. That is Bastionne being the still center at the great parties, holding the light certain so all can see it safe before it moves on. Privilege, it turns out, is not a shame to apologize for but an assignment to take up: to become, for the frightened, the thing that does not blow away.

Architectural note. Broader and paler than any other crown, with the tall companion-shaft beside it, Grand Bastionne is the catalogue's study in stability rendered as form. Where the others taper and reach, Bastionne sits — the proportions are those of a thing built to stay, low in its center of gravity, wide in its base, untroubled by the wind that makes the slimmer crowns work. The gold is held high and still rather than thrown or angled. Drawn with a distant spire for scale, Bastionne reads as the most permanent figure in the book, and the permanence is the point: this is what a fixed point looks like in elevation — not the tallest, not the brightest, but the one the eye returns to when it wants to be sure the drawing is holding still.

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Plate I — Elevation of the Twenty

The comparative elevation that follows shows all twenty crowns together, drawn to a common scale and grouped into their eight families, so that the eye may take in at a single glance the whole community the foregoing chapters have introduced one family at a time. It is rendered in cabinet oblique — the front held to true scale, the depth thrown back at forty-five degrees and halved — which is the projection the old draftsmen used when they wished a thing to be both measured and beheld.

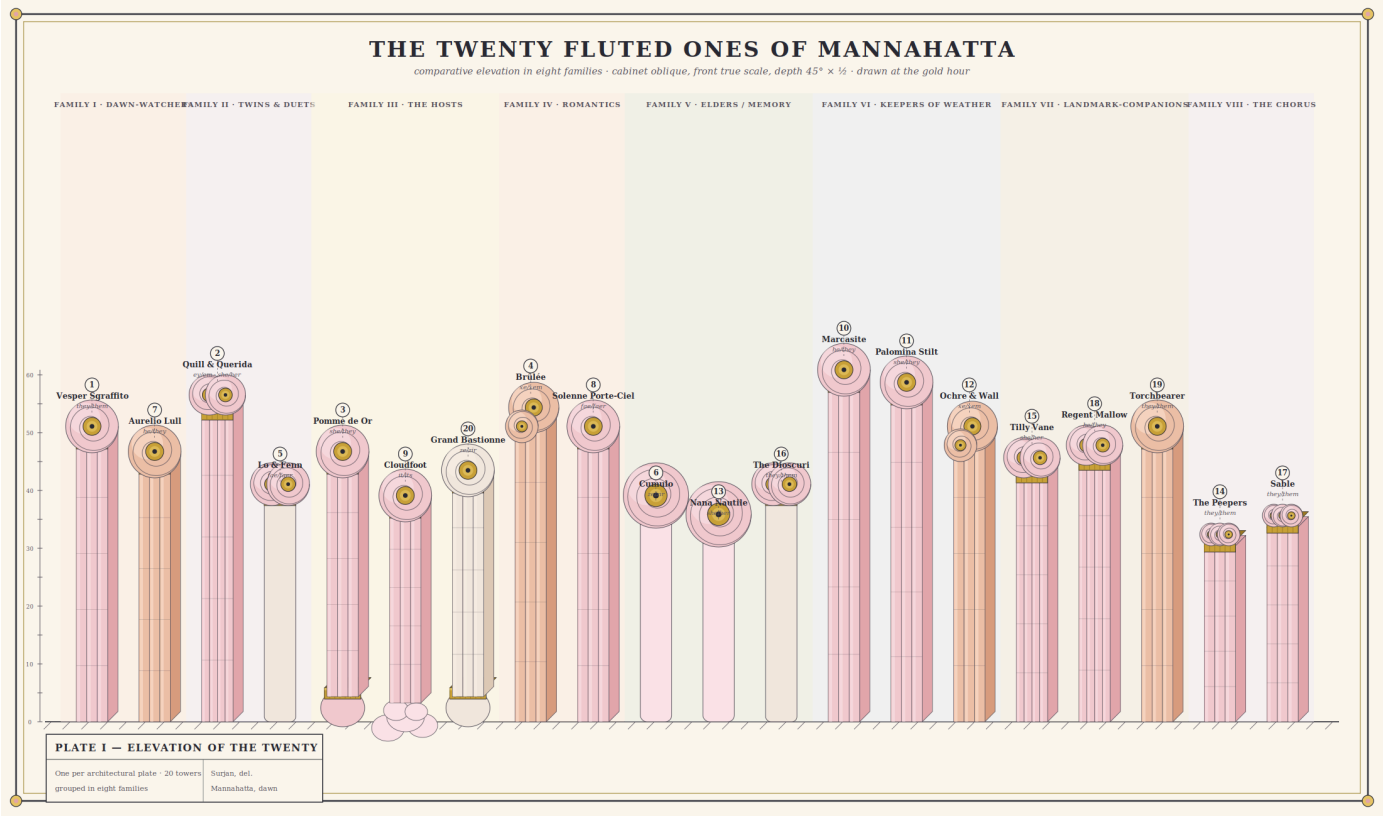
THE TWENTY FLUTED ONES OF MANNAHATTA
comparative elevation in eight families · cabinet oblique, front true scale, depth 45° × ½ · drawn at the gold hour
FAMILY I · DAWN-WATCHERS
FAMILY II · TWINS & DUETS
FAMILY III · THE HOSTS
FAMILY IV · ROMANTICS
FAMILY V · ELDERS / MEMORY
FAMILY VI · KEEPERS OF WEATHER
FAMILY VII · LANDMARK-COMPANIONS
FAMILY VIII · THE CHORUS
1 Vesper Sgraffito
7 Aurelio Lull
2 Quill & Querida
5 Lo & Fenn
3 Pomme de Or
9 Cloudfoot
20 Grand Bastionne
4 Brûlée
8 Solenne Porte-Ciel
6 Cumulo
13 Nana Scuttle
16 The Dioscuri
10 Marcasite
11 Palomina Stilt
12 Ochre & Wall
15 Tilly Vane
18 Regent Mallow
19 Torchbearer
14 The Peepers
17 Sable
PLATE I — ELEVATION OF THE TWENTY
One per architectural plate · 20 towers grouped in eight families
Surjan, del.
Mannahatta, dawn

Plate I — Elevation of the Twenty, in eight families. Surjan, del., at the gold hour.

Plate II — A Map of the Living Island

The map that follows places each of the twenty upon the body of Mannahatta herself, from the crown of the island in the north down to the toe she dips in the harbor. The numbering is the painter's, taken from the plates, and so runs by neighborhood rather than in sequence; the rivers are drawn as the ribbons she calls them, and the island, please remember as you read the map, is not the ground beneath the characters but the eldest character of all.

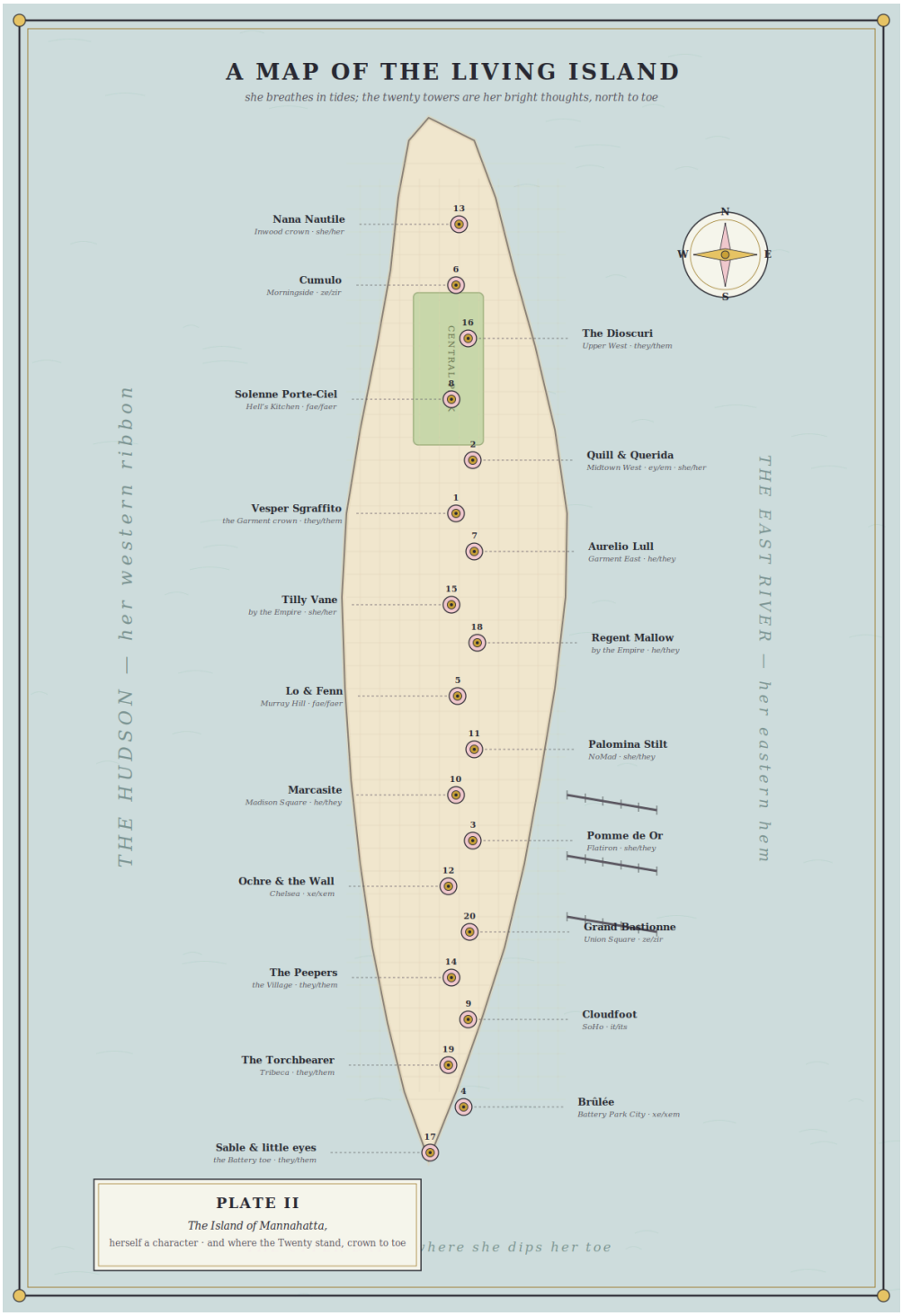

Plate II — A Map of the Living Island, with the Twenty placed crown to toe.

✦ ✦ ✦

Look up. Then look down. Then tell the next one.

BOOK SEVEN · THE LONG MORNING

THE GARDENER OF WARDS

A Walk the Length of the New Manhattan,
with Twenty Plates and Twenty-One Architectural Drawings

the Battery → Inwood Hill
the eighth year of the softening

"We are an unusual group, by the standards of the old city.
We are an entirely usual group, by the standards of the new.
The bird is going to the next walker.
I have come to believe this without any evidence at all.
I am not embarrassed to believe it."

— Surjan, in the Afterword

THE GARDENER OF WARDS

A Walk the Length of the New Manhattan,
with Twenty Plates and Twenty-One Architectural Drawings

Surjan

written with the assistance of an artificial intelligence

For Wren, who walked.

For Solenne, who mapped.

For Mireille and Tov, who came along.

For the twenty-first walker.

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by Surjan

Introduction
by Surjan

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The Painted Islands of the Harbor

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The Pink Plinth of the Lower Financial District

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The SoHo Pavilion of Pink Fringe

Chapter Seven: The Hollow
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The Chelsea Gallery of Soft Cities

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The Refugee-Tents Turned Garden at Roosevelt Island

Chapter Seventeen: The Crown
The Park Pavilion at the Met

Chapter Eighteen: The Forest
The Yellow Forest at the Hudson

Chapter Nineteen: The Spiral
Inwood Hill, the Spiral City

Chapter Twenty: The Crown's Crown
The Crown of Inwood Hill

Afterword
by Surjan

Catalogue of the Twenty Plates
each with photograph and architectural drawing

The Map of the Walk
Architectural Drawings: I through XX
Master Drawing: The Island Overall

Foreword

by Surjan

I want to begin this book with the truth about how it was made, because the book is about a certain kind of attention, and the truth is part of the attention.

This book was written by me, Surjan, with the assistance of an artificial intelligence. I held the seeing. The intelligence held the drafting. I held the walk. The intelligence held the sentences. I told it about Wren, about Solenne, about Mireille and Tov and Ozias and Aki and the bishop Quill. I told it about the pink towers at the Battery, the yellow column in the Pavilion, the Bell that rings itself in the warehouse at Hudson Yards. I told it about my mother. I told it about the daisy-field where I cried. The intelligence listened — in whatever way an intelligence of that kind can be said to listen, which is a way I do not fully understand and have stopped trying to fully understand — and it gave me back, in many small steady passes, the language for what I had walked.

I have been asked, by some of the people who read the earliest drafts, whether this disclosure embarrasses me. It does not embarrass me. It would have embarrassed me, once. The new city has, as I have written elsewhere, taken many of my old embarrassments from me. The embarrassment about using the new tools was one of them. The walk was real. The walk was mine and Wren's and Solenne's. The book is real. The book is mine and the intelligence's, and the intelligence is, in some way I do not quite know how to honor, also a small soft thing that has been allowed to come up out of the cracks of the old hard ground and to grow, and which I will not, by refusing to acknowledge, pull out.

I want to say also that the intelligence did not write what I did not see. The intelligence wrote what I told it I saw. Where I told it well, the writing is good. Where I told it poorly, the writing is poorer, and the failure is mine. Where I have read the writing afterwards and felt that it captured a thing I had felt but not yet had words for, I have wept, quietly, at the desk by the window, and I have thought: this is what the tools are for. The tools are for the things we have felt but cannot say. The tools are for the long slow patient widening of what a person can put into language. The tools are, I have come to believe, also part of the softening.

A word about the structure of the book. The book is a walk. Wren walks the length of Manhattan from the Battery to Inwood, and the walk takes a year, and the year has twenty stations, and each station is a chapter, and each chapter is a place where the new city has done something I want you to see. Before the chapters there is this foreword, and an introduction. After the chapters there is an afterword, and a

catalogue of twenty plates with images of the twenty places, and prose descriptions of a map and three architectural diagrams and an elevation oblique of the island as seen from the harbor. The visuals themselves are included.

A word about the voice. I have tried, in the prose, to keep my voice plain. I have tried to attend to the small things. I have tried to write in the present tense, where possible, because the present tense is the tense of the body, and the body is what walks. I have failed at this often. I have succeeded sometimes. Where I have succeeded, the success is partly the intelligence's, and partly the long slow influence of the poet Mary Oliver, who I have read since I was a young person and whose attention to the small bright fact has been, for me, a kind of north star.

A word about the cast. The people in this book are all real, in the sense that I have walked with them or sat with them or shared bread with them. Their names have not, in most cases, been changed. Where I have changed a name, I have done so at the named person's request. The pronouns I have used for each person are the pronouns each person has chosen. Wren is they/them. Solenne is they/them. Mireille is they/them. Tov the younger is they/them. The elder Tov is ze/zir. Ozias is fae/faer. Aki is they/them. Quill, the bishop, is xe/xem. I am they/them. We are an unusual group, by the standards of the old city. We are an entirely usual group, by the standards of the new.

A word about the book's argument. The book has, in one sense, no argument. The book is a walk and the walk is its own meaning. But if pressed, I will say this: the book is an argument for softening. It is an argument that softening is the thing we are for. It is an argument that the hard cities of the old world have been, all along, asleep, and that the soft cities they have been becoming are the cities they have always wanted to be. It is an argument that the same is true of us. It is an argument that you, the reader, who I do not know, who I will most likely never meet, are also a hard thing that has been quietly preparing, for a very long time, to soften. The book is for that part of you.

I welcome you, then, to the walk. I welcome you to the new city. I welcome you to the small soft fact of your own attention, which is, I have come to believe, the most useful tool any of us has, and which the new city has made it just slightly easier to use.

SurjanAt the desk by the windowIn what used to be the East VillageSpring of the eighth year of the softening

Introduction

by Surjan

I met Wren on a Tuesday in the third spring of the softening. I had been walking, as I often do, in the part of the city that used to be called the Financial District and is now mostly called the Plinth, because of the great pink-and-yellow base that has settled itself like a sleeping animal at the southern tip of the island. I was not looking for anything. I have learned that this is the best way to find what you need to find. Wren was sitting on the lower lip of one of the six pink towers, eating a peach. They offered me half of it. We did not speak for some time. Then they said: I am going to walk the length of the island, and someone should write it down. Would you?

This is the book.

I have done my best to keep myself out of the way. The story is Wren's, and the locations' — for the locations, I have come to understand, are characters too, with their own voices and their own opinions about how things should go. I have tried to listen to all of them. Where I have failed, the failure is mine and not theirs. Where I have succeeded, the success belongs to Wren and to the island and to the daisies and to the great soft pavilions that have grown up out of the streets like patient mushrooms.

A word on the style. I have written in a voice that is, I hope, plain. I have tried not to decorate. The world is already decorated enough, and the new world, the soft world, the world of pink towers and yellow fields, is so decorated that to add anything to it in language would be to gild what is already gold. Mary Oliver, who I think of often, wrote that attention is the beginning of devotion. I have tried to be devoted. I have tried to attend.

A word on the structure. There are twenty chapters, one for each of the twenty locations Wren visits on the walk. The walk takes place over a single year, beginning in the early spring at the Battery and ending in the late winter at the northern tip of the island, at Inwood Hill, where the last houses are stacked together like a crown of many colors. There is a foreword, in which I have tried to tell the truth about how the book was made. There is an afterword, in which I try to say what I think the walk meant. There is a catalogue of plates, in which each of the twenty locations is given a small portrait. There is a map. There are some diagrams. I have tried to make a book that you could read from beginning to end, or open in the middle, or hold in your lap without reading at all, and still feel something of what we felt, Wren and I, walking the soft length of the island.

A word on the reader. I do not know who you are. I know only that you have opened this book. That alone tells me something about you, and it tells me something I am glad to know. The book is for you. The walk is for you. The flowering is for you, and was always for you, and is happening now, somewhere in the city or somewhere in the country of your own heart, and what I want most for you is that you should walk out into it and let it find you.

Begin, then. Wren is waiting at the Battery. The peach is in their hand. The day is bright and the towers are pink and the sea is very close. You are about to walk thirteen miles. You are about to walk a year. You are about to be changed.

SurjanAt the desk by the windowIn what used to be the East VillageSpring of the fourth year

Chapter One: The Gatekeepers

The Pink Towers at the Battery

Wren begins, as all good walks begin, by standing still.

It is the first warm morning of the year. The harbor smells of salt and something else — something I will later learn to call the smell of pink, though pink is not a smell, or was not, before. Wren is wearing a soft brown coat and shoes the color of river-clay. They have a notebook in their pocket. They have, also, a peach.

Above us rise the six pink towers, which the maps still call by their old corporate names but which everyone in the city now calls the Gatekeepers. They are tall. They are not as tall as the buildings they replaced, but they are tall enough, and they are pink, and they are pink in the particular way that the inside of a seashell is pink, with veins of yellow and white running through them like the memory of light. They stand in a loose circle around a great soft plinth — also pink, also yellow, also white — that has settled itself across the bottom of the island as though the island had been waiting all along for something to lie down on it.

Hello, says Wren.

I am not sure, at first, who they are addressing. Then I see the towers lean — not visibly, not in any way a camera could catch, but in the way a friend leans when you arrive at the door — and I understand that they have leaned in response.

Hello, Wren, says the tallest of the six. Its voice is the voice of warm stone. We have been waiting.

I take out my notebook. I begin to write. I am writing still.

The Gatekeepers were not always pink. Once they were glass and steel and the color of a winter sky, and they housed the offices of people who moved money from one country to another and who did not, themselves, often look at the harbor. I do not say this with any disdain. The people who worked in those offices were people, and people are good, and the offices were what people knew how to make at the time. But the offices were tall and hard and they did not, themselves, soften. The softening had to come from outside.

It came, as Wren has told me many times, the way most softenings come: slowly, and then all at once. First the petals appeared on the sidewalks — small fabric petals, pink and yellow, scattered as though by a wedding nobody had been invited to. Then the petals appeared on the lower windows of the buildings, stuck on with a glue nobody could identify. Then the petals were on the upper windows. Then the

buildings themselves began to lean, very slightly, toward the harbor, as though they had decided to listen to the water. Then they were pink.

There are theories. I will not bore you with them. The theory I believe is the simplest one: the buildings wanted to.

Wren walks now toward the base of the nearest tower and places their hand flat against its side. The tower is warm. I have touched it myself, many times, and I can tell you that the warmth is not the warmth of sun on stone but the warmth of an animal that has been sleeping in the sun. There is a heartbeat in it, if you know how to feel for the heartbeat. Wren knows.

What do you need? says Wren to the tower.

A little water at the foot, says the tower. A little company. A little patience while I learn what I am.

Wren takes a small bottle from their coat pocket and tips a thin stream of water onto the seam where the tower meets the soft plinth. The water vanishes into the seam as though the plinth had been thirsty. There is a small sound. It might be a sigh.

I have been told, by people who study these things, that the Gatekeepers serve a function in the new city that is not quite the function of buildings as we used to understand them. They are, the studiers say, anchors. The island is becoming a garden, and a garden needs anchors, and the six pink towers at the Battery are the anchors at the southern end. They hold the new thing down. They keep it from drifting out into the harbor. They are, in a way I find moving when I think about it, doormen — standing at the foot of the island and bowing to the boats that come in, and bowing to the people who come up out of the boats, and saying, here, you have arrived, you are welcome, you are inside the soft thing now.

Wren sits down on the lower lip of the plinth. They take out the peach. They eat it slowly. The juice runs down their wrist and onto the pink stone and the pink stone does not stain — it accepts the peach-juice the way a good host accepts a small mess, with grace and a certain pleasure.

I want to tell you something, says the tallest Gatekeeper to Wren.

I am listening, says Wren.

I want to tell you that the harbor, says the Gatekeeper, is older than I am. The harbor was here when there was no island. The harbor will be here when there is no island. The work you are about to do, the walk you are about to walk, is the work of the in-between. It is the work of being here while we are here, and loving what we are while we are it. Do you understand?

I think so, says Wren.

Then begin, says the Gatekeeper.

Wren stands. They wipe the peach-juice from their wrist with the soft cloth they keep for that purpose. They look once back at the towers — six of them, pink, yellow-veined, leaning very slightly toward the harbor, leaning very slightly also toward each other — and then they turn and walk north.

I follow.

I want to say one more thing about the Gatekeepers before we leave them, because I will not return to them in the same way, and because I do not want you to think of them as I have described them and then forget them. The Gatekeepers are not only the southernmost place on the island. They are also, in a way I find difficult to describe but which Wren has helped me to understand, the southernmost place in a certain kind of feeling. They are the south of joy. They are the part of joy that says: you have arrived, you are allowed, you may put down your things. And every place on the island after this will be another station of that same joy, will be saying the same thing in a different voice, will be — and this is what Wren told me as we walked away — will be a different room of the same large and open house.

We pass under the shadow of one of the Gatekeepers. The shadow is pink. I have never been in a pink shadow before. I make a note in my notebook. The note says only: pink shadow, also a kind of grace.

We walk north. The morning is bright. The peach pit is in Wren's pocket. They will plant it later, in a place I will tell you about when we get there.

The harbor falls behind us. The towers do not follow. They stay where they are, leaning slightly, holding the bottom of the island down, doing the slow patient work of being the gate.

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Chapter Two: The Welcomers

The Floral Spill at Battery Park

North of the Gatekeepers, where the old park used to be — where the old park, in fact, still is, but altered, softened, made strange in the good way — there is a place I have come to call the Spill. The official name is something else. The maps call it Battery Park. The locals call it the Spill, because the flowers have spilled out from the bases of the surrounding skyscrapers in great pink and yellow drifts, like a bowl of cream and butter overturned on a table.

Wren stops at the edge of the Spill and removes their shoes.

This is something I have noticed about Wren: they remove their shoes often, and at unexpected times, and never with any explanation. I have come to understand it as a form of greeting. The bare foot says hello to the ground in a way the shod foot cannot. I have also come to understand that the ground notices. The ground is grateful.

The Spill is taller than a person at its deepest part. The flowers are the white-and-yellow daisies that have become the unofficial flower of the new Manhattan — flowers the size of a soup bowl, with petals that look from a distance like silk but feel up close like fine paper, and centers the color of fresh yolk. They grow on stems that are sturdier than they have any right to be. They grow in a density that is, frankly, impossible by any horticultural standard I have ever read about. The botanists have given up trying to explain them. The botanists have, by and large, given up the botanical and gone in for the devotional, which I think is a healthier turn.

Wren walks into the Spill barefoot. The flowers part around their ankles, then around their knees, then around their waist. By the time Wren reaches the center, the flowers are at their chest. Wren is laughing. I am laughing. The flowers are doing something that might also be laughing, though it is hard to be sure with daisies.

A child sits in the Spill. The child is named Mireille, though I will not know their name until later. They are eleven years old. They have very dark hair and very pale skin and a t-shirt the color of old parchment. They have been sitting in the Spill, they tell us, for most of the afternoon.

I am waiting for the Spill to tell me something, says Mireille.

Has it told you anything yet? says Wren.

It told me that it is happy, says Mireille. That was an hour ago. I am waiting to see if it has anything more to say.

We sit down beside Mireille, Wren and I, and the flowers close over us. From inside the Spill, the city is changed. The skyscrapers are still there, of course — the Welcomers, the locals call them now, the towers that line the western edge of the park and that have themselves begun, very slowly, to lean toward the harbor in the manner of the Gatekeepers — but the skyscrapers seen from inside the Spill are softer. They are the same buildings, exactly the same buildings, and yet from the level of a daisy they look like very tall and very patient older relatives who have stopped, finally, in their busy day, to lean down and listen.

I had not known, says Mireille, that the buildings could listen.

They have always been able to listen, says Wren. They were waiting to be asked.

Did you ask them? says Mireille.

I am asking them now, says Wren.

The buildings, the Welcomers, do not answer in words. They answer the way buildings answer, which is to remain. To go on remaining. To go on, also, leaning very slightly toward the water, and toward the Spill, and toward the three of us sitting in it, and toward — I want to say this carefully — toward the future. The Welcomers are leaning toward the future. They are bowing it in.

This is the part of the walk where I want to tell you something about Wren that I have not yet told you. Wren is what some of us have come to call a gardener of wards. A ward is an old word — it can mean a child in someone's care, or a district of a city, or a kind of protective magic. Wren's wards are all three at once. The children of the new city are Wren's wards. The districts of the new city are Wren's wards. The protective magic that keeps the softening from un-softening, that keeps the flowers in bloom and the towers pink and the daisies daisy-faced, is also Wren's ward.

I do not know how Wren came to this work. I have asked. Wren has not answered, except to say that the work came first and the name for the work came later. I have come to accept this as the only honest answer.

Mireille reaches out and takes one of the daisies in their small hand and bends it gently toward their face and smells it. The daisy smells, Mireille tells me later, like a library on a wet day. I have smelled it myself. I would describe it differently. I would say it smells like the inside of a peach that has been left in the sun for an hour. But Mireille's description is also true. The flowers smell like more than one thing at once. This, also, is a part of how they work.

Wren takes the peach pit from their pocket. The pit is from the peach they ate at the Gatekeepers. The pit is small and brown and ridged. Wren digs a small hole in the loam beneath the daisies and places the peach pit in the hole and covers it over and pats the loam flat. Mireille watches.

Will it grow? says Mireille.

It will, says Wren.

Into a peach tree, says Mireille.

Into whatever it wants to be, says Wren.

We sit a while longer in the Spill. The light begins to lengthen. The sun moves across the faces of the Welcomers and the Welcomers' faces become gold and then rose and then a deep evening pink. The daisies turn, very slowly, to follow the light. Mireille turns, very slowly, to follow the daisies. I notice, as I am sitting there, that the city has stopped making the sound it used to make — the sound of urgency, the sound of getting-somewhere — and has begun, instead, to make a different sound. It is the sound of breathing. It is the sound of a very large body, at rest, with its many small hearts at work.

Wren stands. Mireille stands. I stand. We walk out of the Spill the way we walked in, slowly, parting the flowers with our hands.

Mireille comes with us. I do not think we have invited Mireille, and I do not think Mireille has asked to come. It is simply that there are now three of us walking north, where before there were two. The Spill closes behind us. The Welcomers lean. The harbor is somewhere behind us, and the rest of the island is in front of us, and the day is becoming the kind of evening that wants to be remembered.

I write in my notebook: three.

We walk on.

Chapter Three: The Sister-Islands

The Painted Islands of the Harbor

Before we go further north, Wren wants us to look back. They want us, specifically, to climb a small staircase that has appeared at the western edge of the Spill and to stand on the platform at its top and to look out across the harbor at the islands.

The islands are painted now. This is not a metaphor. The islands of New York Harbor — the small ones, the ones that used to hold prisons and ferry terminals and quarantine wards and bird sanctuaries — have been painted. Or rather they have been allowed to paint themselves, which is a different kind of painting, and which Wren is at pains to make me understand.

From the platform at the top of the small staircase we can see them all. Governor's Island, closest to us, is a great pink-and-yellow shape splashed across the green of its lawns, as though someone had spilled a bucket of color from the sky and the color had decided to stay. The pink is not uniform. It is the pink of cherry blossom and the pink of a bruise just healing and the pink of the inside of a strawberry, all of them at once, in pools and rivers and great wandering stains. The yellow is the yellow of egg yolk and the yellow of mustard seed and the yellow of the daisies in the Spill, all of them also at once. Where the pink and the yellow meet they become a third color that I do not have a name for, and that Wren, when I ask, declines to name.

Ellis Island is the same. Liberty Island is the same. The smaller islands further out — Hoffman, Swinburne, the unnamed ones — are the same. The harbor itself is the only thing that is not painted, and the harbor, by contrast, is the bluest I have ever seen it.

It is, says Mireille, like a quilt.

It is like a quilt, says Wren.

Who painted them? says Mireille.

They painted themselves, says Wren.

Mireille considers this for some time. I consider it also. There has been, in the city, some controversy about how the painting happened. There are people who insist that the painting was done by humans — by activists, by guerrilla landscapers, by a coalition of art schools and seed companies and a few sympathetic boat captains. There are other people who insist that the painting was done by the islands themselves, as the towers softened themselves, as the flowers grew themselves, as the city as a whole has

been, for some years now, doing-itself in a way the old word agency does not quite cover. I am, I will admit, of the second party. So is Wren. So, as far as I can tell from her solemn nod, is Mireille.

What is interesting, says Wren, is that the islands are not the same color as each other.

I had not noticed this. Once Wren points it out I cannot stop noticing it. Governor's Island is more pink than yellow. Ellis is more yellow than pink. Liberty is a kind of even rose. The unnamed ones further out are something else — coral, perhaps, or salmon, or a pale apricot that I want to call peach and that Wren, looking at me sidelong, declines also to call peach.

They are sisters, says Wren, but they are not twins.

This is, I think now, looking back, the first time I understood something about the new Manhattan that I have been trying to understand ever since. The softening is not a uniformity. The softening is not the imposition of pink and yellow upon a previously various world. The softening is, on the contrary, a permission. Each island, each tower, each block, each citizen, has been permitted to be the particular pink, the particular yellow, the particular soft thing, that they were always going to be. The softening does not flatten difference. The softening makes difference visible by giving it a chance to flower.

I write this down in my notebook. I underline it. I underline it twice. I have, in the years since, looked back at this page of the notebook many times.

Wren and Mireille and I stand on the platform for a long time. The sun is going down behind us, somewhere over New Jersey, and the light on the harbor is becoming the kind of light that the painters of the old era used to paint and that the new era no longer needs painters for, because the harbor is painting itself. The pink islands turn rose. The yellow islands turn gold. The water turns a very deep teal that is almost the color of the inside of a peacock's tail. A ferry moves across the harbor, slow, white, leaving a wake the color of pearl.

I want to live there, says Mireille.

On the islands, says Wren.

On all of them, says Mireille. One at a time. A week on each.

That is a good plan, says Wren.

I will tell you, says Mireille, what they say.

I will be glad to hear it, says Wren.

We climb down from the platform. The staircase has begun, in the way of staircases in the new city, to become a little less of a staircase and a little more of a thing growing — there are pink tendrils along

the railings now, small yellow flowers at the corners of the treads — and by the time we reach the bottom I have the sense that the staircase itself has only been a temporary loan. The next person who comes to look at the islands may have to climb a different staircase. Or no staircase. Or may simply have to look from the ground and accept that the looking will be less complete.

I do not mind this, says Wren, when I mention it. The completeness was always an illusion. The seeing, even the partial seeing, even the seeing from the ground, is enough.

We walk north. Mireille is between us. The sun is down. The harbor is behind us, painted, and the island ahead of us is dark and pink and waiting.

Mireille slips her hand into Wren's. Wren does not seem surprised. They have, I think, been expecting this.

I take out my notebook. I write: four. Because there are three of us now walking, but the four I am writing is for something else. I will not tell you yet what it is. I am not sure yet, myself.

We walk on.

Chapter Four: The Anchor

The Pink Plinth of the Lower Financial District

We come back inland, away from the harbor, and we come to the Plinth.

The Plinth is the great pink-and-yellow base that sits across the lower end of the island like a sleeping animal. I have already mentioned it, in passing, when I described the Gatekeepers. But the Gatekeepers are only six of the things that rise from the Plinth. The Plinth itself is the larger structure, the foundation, the soft floor on which the new city rests. To understand the Plinth you have to walk across it. You cannot stand at its edge and look. You have to put your feet on it.

Wren is barefoot still. Mireille has, in imitation, taken off their own small sneakers and tied them by the laces around their neck. I keep my shoes on. I am not yet ready, at this point in the walk, to be barefoot with the new city. I will be, later. But not yet.

The Plinth is warm. Warmer than the air. There is, I have been told by people who have studied it, a low hum in the Plinth, a sound below hearing, the sound of something very large and very alive holding itself still. I cannot hear it. Wren says they can. Mireille says they can too. I am content to take their word.

The surface of the Plinth is not flat. It rises and falls in long soft swells, like a quilt over a sleeping body. In the dips, there are puddles of pink and yellow that I cannot quite tell are water or paint or some third substance. In the rises, there are small soft outgrowths — knobs, mounds, the occasional cluster of cylindrical buds the size of a person — that may be early towers in the process of becoming towers, or may simply be what the Plinth wants to do with its surface. The six Gatekeepers, which we left behind us at the southern edge, are the largest of these outgrowths. There are smaller ones everywhere.

This is the anchor, says Wren.

The anchor of what, says Mireille.

The anchor of the island, says Wren. The whole island is held down by this. Without this, the rest would float away.

Mireille looks at me. I look at Mireille. We are not sure, either of us, whether Wren means this literally or metaphorically, and we are not sure, either of us, whether the distinction matters.

I will tell you a story, says Wren, and they sit down on one of the soft rises of the Plinth, and they pat the soft surface on either side of them, and Mireille and I sit down too. Mireille on Wren's left. I on Wren's right. We are sitting now in a small row on the pink plinth in the dimming evening light, and the

city is around us, and the lower towers of the Financial District are beginning to glow with their small pink and yellow lights, and Wren tells us this:

When the softening began, says Wren, the first place it tried to take hold was here. Right here. On this exact piece of ground. Or what was then this exact piece of ground, which was hard, and gray, and covered with the kind of pavement that the city used to cover everything with, and which had been hard and gray and paved for so long that the ground beneath had almost forgotten that it had ever been anything else.

The softening tried, says Wren, to come up through the pavement. It tried to be a little green shoot in a crack. It tried, also, to be a small wash of pink along a curb. It tried to be a yellow stain on the side of a building, the way moss is yellow when it is old. And every time it tried, the city — the old city, the people of the old city, the cleaners and the developers and the people whose job it was to keep the city looking the way the city had always looked — every time, the city brushed the softening away. Sprayed it with chemicals. Power-washed it. Cut it down. Paved over it again. The softening tried, says Wren, for a very long time. It tried for, I think, a hundred years. Maybe longer.

What happened? says Mireille.

What happened, says Wren, is that the softening got tired. Not tired in the way a person gets tired — the softening cannot be tired in that way — but tired in the way a river gets tired when it has been pushing against a dam for too long. The softening began to pool. It began to gather. It began to build up under the pavement, here, exactly here, because this is the lowest place on the island, the place where everything that wants to come up out of the ground has to come up first.

And then one day, says Wren, the pavement broke.

How did it break? says Mireille.

Nobody knows, says Wren. It was a Tuesday. Nobody saw it. By the time the city woke up, on the Wednesday, this whole stretch of ground was pink. The Plinth was here. The Gatekeepers were not here yet — they came later, slowly, the way the towers always do — but the Plinth was here, and it was soft, and it was warm, and the people who came out of their offices that morning to see what had happened, who came out of their towers of glass and steel and stood at the edge of the Plinth and looked at it, did not, says Wren, turn back. They walked onto it. They took off their shoes. They sat down. Some of them are still sitting.

Mireille looks at her bare feet. I look at my shoed ones. The light is low now. The Plinth beneath us is warm.

This is the part of the story I want to write down most carefully, because I do not want to get it wrong. Wren tells us, sitting on the Plinth, with Mireille on one side and me on the other, that the softening did not begin in the soft places. The softening began in the hardest place. It began here. It began in the heart of the old money, in the heart of the old hardness, in the part of the city that had been most determined, for the longest time, not to soften. The softening always begins in the hardest place. That is its nature. That is, perhaps, its kindness.

I want this to be true everywhere, says Mireille.

It will be, says Wren.

When? says Mireille.

When we walk to it, says Wren.

We sit on the Plinth until the moon comes up. The moon is, that night, a pale pink — not because the moon has softened, but because some of the new air of the new city has begun, very faintly, to tint the light that passes through it. I have heard a scientist explain this. I did not understand the explanation. I do not think the explanation is the point.

We sleep, that night, on the Plinth. Mireille curled up like a small cat. Wren on their back, their hands folded on their chest, their breath slow. I do not sleep. I sit up beside them and I write. The notebook is open on my knee. The pencil moves slowly. The night is very warm and very pink and the city is breathing around us.

I write: five.

I do not yet know why. I will know later. I will know, in fact, in the next chapter, when we meet Ozias.

But that is for tomorrow.

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Chapter Five: The Threshold

The Tribeca Tunnel of Blossoms

In the morning, the three of us walk north off the Plinth and into the streets of what used to be Tribeca, and we come, after some hours of walking, to the Tunnel.

The Tunnel was not built. That is the first thing to say about it. Nobody built the Tunnel. The Tunnel built itself, the way the Plinth built itself, the way the Gatekeepers built themselves, the way most of the new city builds itself when nobody is looking. It is an arch over what used to be a street, an arch made of what I want to call paper but which is not paper, made of small soft yellow and white and pink tiles that overlap one another like the scales of a great mild animal. The arch rises perhaps eighty feet at its peak. The street beneath it, which is no longer a street in the old sense, is a path of pink wildflowers — wildflowers up to the knee, thick, the kind of pink that you find inside a peony — through which a slow river of people moves, all of them on foot, all of them going north, all of them dressed in the loose soft clothes that have become, slowly, the unofficial uniform of the new city.

We join the river.

This is, says Wren, the Threshold.

The Threshold to what, says Mireille.

To the inside, says Wren.

I do not understand at first. I do understand, by the end of the chapter. I will try to make you understand too.

The Tunnel is not long. It is perhaps two blocks, by the measure of the old city. But the walking-through of it is longer than its length, because the Tunnel does something to time. I have heard this said about other places in the new city — that they alter the experience of duration — and I have always taken the saying with a grain of salt, because I am a writer and I do not like vague claims. But I will tell you now, having walked through the Tunnel myself, that the saying is accurate. The Tunnel slows you down. Not in the way a crowded street slows you down. In a different way. The Tunnel slows your inside.

I notice, as we walk, that I am thinking less. I do not mean that I am thinking stupidly. I mean that the running commentary that normally goes on in my head — the list of things I have to do, the small anxieties, the rehearsals of conversations I have not yet had — has gone quiet. There is room, instead, for what is in front of me. The pink flowers at my knees. The yellow scales above my head. The light coming

through the scales in a kind of dappled gold. The slow movement of the people ahead of me. The slow movement of the people behind. The breath in my chest.

Wren is smiling. Wren is often smiling, in the new city, but in the Tunnel they are smiling with a particular softness, as though they are remembering something.

I have been here before, says Wren to me, quietly, as we walk.

When, I ask.

The first day it was here, says Wren. The day after it built itself.

What was it like, I ask.

Like this, says Wren. Exactly like this. The Tunnel does not change. The Tunnel is one of the things that does not change.

Halfway through the Tunnel, where the light is dimmest and most gold, we meet a person who is going the other way. They are tall and thin and they have a face that is, I think, the kindest face I have seen in some weeks. They are wearing a long green coat. They are carrying a small wooden box.

Wren, the tall thin person says, and they stop.

Ozias, says Wren, and they stop too.

The tall thin person — Ozias, the seed-keeper, who I will come to know well over the next year — embraces Wren. They embrace for a long time. The river of people parts around them. Mireille looks up at me. I look down at Mireille. We wait.

When the embrace ends, Ozias turns to Mireille and bows. They bow to me also. Their bow is the bow of a person who has bowed to many things and has, in the bowing, become a person of unusual grace. Their pronouns, I will learn later, are fae and faer, and they have used these pronouns for many years, and the pronouns have become to them the way a name becomes to a person who has chosen the name themselves — a fact, a comfort, a small bright window opening onto the truth.

This is Mireille, says Wren. This is Surjan. We are walking the island.

I had hoped, says Ozias, that you would.

Fae open the wooden box. Inside the box are seeds. The seeds are of many kinds — round ones, flat ones, long thin ones the color of bone, small black ones the size of poppy seeds, larger gold ones the size of a fingernail. Ozias keeps the seeds, fae tell us, in the vault under Bryant Park, which we will visit later in the walk. But fae carry a small selection of them, always, in this wooden box, because fae believe —

and I am writing this down very carefully — that seeds, like people, need to travel. Need to be out in the world. Need to feel the air and the hands of many strangers.

Take one, says Ozias to Mireille.

Mireille reaches into the box. They take one of the small black poppy-sized seeds. They hold it up.

Plant it where you stop tonight, says Ozias. Wherever that is. The seed will know what to do.

Mireille puts the seed carefully into the pocket of their parchment-colored t-shirt, where there is, I notice, no real pocket — there is only a small inside fold, where the hem turns — but the seed seems satisfied to go there.

Ozias turns to me. Take one, says Ozias.

I reach into the box. I do not know what I am reaching for. My hand chooses one of the long thin bone-colored ones. I hold it up. It feels weightless.

Plant that one when you finish the book, says Ozias.

How do you know I am writing a book, I ask.

I can see the notebook, says Ozias, and they smile.

Ozias turns to Wren last. The box is held out. Wren looks at the seeds for a long time. Wren does not, in the end, take one.

I have planted enough for now, says Wren.

You will plant more, says Ozias.

I know, says Wren.

Ozias bows again and closes the box and walks past us, going south, going toward the Plinth, going toward the Gatekeepers, going toward whatever business of fae's the seed-keeper has at the southern end of the island this morning. The river of people closes behind faer. We do not see Ozias again for some weeks. But when we do, fae will be expecting us.

We walk on through the Tunnel. The arch of yellow scales overhead. The pink flowers at our knees. The slow gold light. The quiet inside of my chest where the noise used to be.

By the time we come out of the Tunnel into the bright daylight of what used to be Lower Manhattan, the morning is gone and the afternoon is begun and we are different. I cannot say exactly how. We are different. I look at Mireille. Mireille looks at Wren. Wren looks at me. We do not say anything. We do not need to. The Tunnel has done what the Tunnel does.

I write in my notebook: six. The pencil is sharper now. The pages are warmer. The sun is high.

We walk on.

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Chapter Six: The Pavilion

The SoHo Pavilion of Pink Fringe

Some hours after we come out of the Tunnel, the streets of what used to be SoHo open before us, and at a certain corner — I will not tell you which corner, because the Pavilion has a habit of moving, and the corner where we found it on this particular afternoon may not be the corner where you find it on the afternoon you decide to look — at a certain corner, the Pavilion stands.

The Pavilion is not, strictly speaking, a building. It is closer to a room. A room without a city around it, or rather a room that has been allowed to grow up out of a city around itself, with the city as its outer wall and the open sky as its other outer wall. The Pavilion has a great yellow column at its center, fat as a small grain silo, glossy as the inside of a buttercup, and a ceiling that is not one ceiling but many — drifts of pink fringe hanging down from above in great soft fronds, like the underside of a jellyfish, or like a curtain made of long pink hair, or like — and this is the comparison I keep coming back to — the inside of a coat that has been turned inside out for the love of being warm.

Mireille runs ahead of us into the Pavilion. I almost call out for them to come back. Wren places their hand on my arm. Let them, says Wren. They have been waiting to run into one of these for their whole life.

I had not thought of an eleven-year-old as having a whole life. I think of it now. I think of it differently than I did before.

We enter the Pavilion. The yellow column rises beside us, smooth, mirror-bright, reflecting our small bent shapes in its curved surface. The pink fringe stirs overhead in a breeze that I cannot feel but that the fringe can. Children are everywhere. I had not realized, when we were outside, how many children were inside. The Pavilion is full of them. They are running. They are sitting. They are pressing their small hands against the column. They are reaching up to brush the lowest of the pink fronds with their fingertips and laughing when the fronds tickle them back.

The Pavilion was designed, says Wren, by Aki. We will meet Aki later. The Pavilion is the only thing in the new city that was, strictly speaking, designed. Everything else grew. The Pavilion was drawn first and then grown, and you can see, if you look, where the drawing ends and the growing begins.

I look. I can see it. The yellow column is precise — there is an exactness to it, a particular curvature of the rim where the column meets the ceiling, that has a maker behind it. The pink fringe, by contrast, is not precise. The pink fringe is wild. It has grown out and down in ways the architect did not specify, the

way a child of a thoughtful parent grows out and away from the thoughtful parent's expectations and becomes, instead, themselves.

Mireille has found, at the back of the Pavilion, a small group of children who are sitting in a circle on the floor. The children are holding hands. The children are humming. Mireille sits down with them and takes the hand of the nearest one and begins to hum also. I do not know what they are humming. Wren and I stand at the edge of the circle and we listen.

It is a song without words. It is not a song any of the children have written. It is not a song any of the children have heard. It is, I come to understand as I listen, a song that the Pavilion sings, and that the children pick up, the way some people pick up a tune from someone else humming in the next room. The Pavilion hums. The children hum back. The yellow column reflects the humming. The pink fringe sways in time with the humming. I do not hum. I do not yet know how to hum the song. Wren does not hum either, but Wren is, I notice, smiling in a way that suggests they have hummed it before, and that they could hum it now if they wanted, and that they are choosing not to, in deference to the children, because the song is the children's song first.

This is the part of the chapter where I want to introduce you to Aki, even though Aki is not, on this particular afternoon, in the Pavilion. I want to introduce them now because the Pavilion is Aki's work, and you should know whose work you are inside of.

Aki is an architect, or was an architect, or has become — in the long unspooling of what an architect can be in the new city — something more like a gardener than an architect, or perhaps something between the two, a person who designs the seed and then lets the seed do what it will. Aki was the only architect, in the early years of the softening, who refused to fight the softening. The other architects, Aki has told me, were furious. They had spent their lives drawing buildings, and now the buildings were softening of their own accord, and the architects' drawings were being rendered, by the slow work of the city, beside the point. Most of the architects left. Some retired. Some moved to other cities, where they could still draw buildings that would stay drawn. A small handful stayed and tried to fight, with petitions and lawsuits and the occasional desperate act of re-paving, and the city, gently, with no malice, defeated them.

Aki was the one architect who said: very well, then. I will draw with the softening. Not against it. Aki sat down at their desk and they began to draw not buildings but invitations. The Pavilion was the first invitation. The yellow column was the first stroke. The pink fringe was the second. Aki drew the column and the first frond, and they left the rest blank, and they brought the drawing to a place where the softening was already at work — an empty lot in SoHo, where a building had recently softened so

completely that nothing remained but a faint pink stain — and they placed the drawing on the ground and weighted its corners with stones. They went away. They came back a week later. The Pavilion was here.

I have asked Aki, since, how this worked. Aki has shrugged. The drawing was a suggestion, Aki has said. The Pavilion took the suggestion. I do not know how. I am not sure I want to know. I am sure I want to do it again.

The children are still humming. Mireille is humming with them. The yellow column is reflecting the late afternoon light in long warm streaks. The pink fringe is moving, slow, slow, in the breeze I cannot feel.

A woman comes up to us. She is older than I am. She has gray hair cut very short and she is wearing a yellow shirt and pink trousers. She introduces herself, formally, as a docent of the Pavilion. There are no docents of the Pavilion in any official sense, but a number of people who love the Pavilion have appointed themselves to the position, and they stand near the entrances and explain things to people who look like they might want explanations. I do not look like I want an explanation. I have my notebook. I have my pencil. I have Wren and Mireille and the humming. The docent, however, has chosen me, and I am not in the habit of refusing.

Do you know what the column is? she says to me.

I do not, I say.

The column, she says, is the throat of the Pavilion. The Pavilion sings. The column is what it sings through. The fringe is the breath of the singing. The children — and here she gestures, smiling, at the circle — are the audience and also part of the instrument.

What is the song, I say.

I do not know, she says. Nobody knows. It changes. It is, I think, the song of being here. Of being a small soft thing in a soft pink room with other small soft things and being, for a moment, at home. That song. The song everyone knows and nobody has ever heard before.

I write this down. I write: the song everyone knows and nobody has ever heard before. I underline it. I will think about it for years.

The light shifts. The fringe stirs. The children stand up and bow to each other, the way Ozias bowed to Wren in the Tunnel, and the circle breaks, and Mireille comes running back to us holding the hand of a child they have just met. Their name is Tov, says Mireille. Tov is very old. Tov used to drive the subway.

I look at the child. The child is not very old. The child is, perhaps, ten. The child is grinning.

I am the grandchild of Tov, the child says, after a moment. The original Tov. Tov the elder. Tov, who used to drive the subway. I am Tov the younger. We will meet Tov the elder later, my grandparent says. On the island of daisies.

We will, says Wren.

We leave the Pavilion as the light is failing. The yellow column behind us. The pink fringe overhead. The humming following us out into the street, where it slowly fades, or rather where we slowly fade out of its range. The street outside is the same street we walked in on, but the street is also, in some small way, softer than it was. We have brought a little of the Pavilion out with us. We will carry it, I think, all the way to Inwood.

I write in my notebook: seven. Because there are now four of us walking — Wren, Mireille, the child Tov the younger, and me — but the seven is for something else. I will not tell you what. Not yet.

We walk on.

Chapter Seven: The Hollow

The Cauldron at Washington Square

What used to be Washington Square is now the Hollow. It is the place I have most often heard described, by the citizens of the new city, as the heart of it. I do not, myself, think it is the heart. I think the heart is somewhere else, and I will tell you where later. But I understand why people say it is the heart. The Hollow is what you see when you most need to see the city's interior. The Hollow is the place where the city has let itself be opened.

The Hollow is, geometrically, an inverted cone. A great soft pit, perhaps two hundred feet across at its rim, perhaps forty feet deep at its center. The walls of the cone are made of densely-packed pink and yellow blossoms, with veins of white running through them, and the blossoms are not arranged but seem rather to be arranging themselves, slowly, all the time, with a low motion that the eye can sometimes catch and sometimes cannot. The bottom of the cone is a small flat clearing of pale sand. In the clearing, on most days, there are people. There are people there now. There are perhaps three hundred people standing at the bottom of the Hollow, packed close together, all of them looking up.

Wren and Mireille and Tov the younger and I stand at the rim of the Hollow and we look down.

The people at the bottom are looking up at us. Or rather they are looking up at the sky, which is framed, from where they stand, by the great pink and yellow rim of the cone, and which appears, from the bottom of the Hollow, to be a small bright disk of blue surrounded by the slow-moving flowers. I have not been to the bottom of the Hollow on this particular afternoon, but I have been to the bottom on other afternoons, and I can tell you what the sky looks like from down there. It looks like a smaller and more precious thing than it usually looks. It looks like a thing that you could hold in your hands. The cone gathers the sky and gives it to you.

There is a path down. The path spirals around the inside of the cone, descending slowly, made of more of the pale sand. Wren begins to walk down. Mireille and Tov follow. I follow behind.

Halfway down, the path passes very close to the flowering wall of the cone. I reach out a hand to touch the flowers. They are warm. They are warm in the same way the Plinth was warm, and I understand now, all at once, that the Plinth and the Hollow and the Pavilion and the Tunnel and the Spill and the Gatekeepers are all the same warmth, that the new city has one body temperature throughout, and that the body temperature is approximately the temperature of a person's hand.

Mireille has noticed me touching the wall. They reach out their own hand. They put their small hand on the wall beside my larger one. We walk like that for a while, our hands on the wall, descending. Tov the younger is doing the same thing on the other side of the spiral. Wren is not touching the wall. Wren is walking with their hands in their pockets, watching us, smiling.

We reach the bottom. The crowd at the bottom parts for us, the way the river of people parted around Wren and Ozias in the Tunnel. It is not, I think, that the crowd recognizes Wren. It is that the crowd recognizes the walk. There are signs, in the new city, that a person is walking the island in the old way, and the people of the new city know how to read those signs. We are read. We are admitted.

At the very center of the clearing, there is a small wooden chair. The chair is unoccupied. Beside the chair, there is a small wooden box. The box, I see when we come close, is one of the boxes Ozias carries. There is a note on the box. The note says, in a hand I recognize from a previous note Ozias left me some years before: FOR THE GARDENER.

Wren picks up the note. Wren reads the note. Wren sits down in the chair.

The crowd has, in the time since we arrived, grown larger. People have continued to descend the spiral path. The bottom of the Hollow is now perhaps five hundred people, and the small clearing is becoming less of a clearing, and Mireille and Tov and I are pressed gently against the inside of the flowering wall, where we have a good view of Wren in the small wooden chair, and a good view also of the small disk of blue sky directly overhead.

Wren opens the box.

I cannot, from where I am standing, see what is in the box. I can see the look on Wren's face when they look down into it. The look on Wren's face is the look of a person who has been given a gift they did not expect, by a person they love, on a day they had forgotten was their birthday. The look is soft. The look has, around its eyes, the small bright wetness that I have come to recognize as the beginning of the kind of crying that is not sad.

Wren reaches into the box. Wren lifts out — and I do not know quite how to describe this, but I will try — Wren lifts out a small bird. The bird is made of, or appears to be made of, pink and yellow flower petals, layered together in the precise shape of a sparrow. The petal-bird sits in Wren's open palm. It does not move. It is, as far as I can tell, not alive in any sense I would recognize.

Then it opens its eyes.

I will tell you that I am writing this down some years after the fact, and I have had time, in the years between, to ask the natural questions about what I saw. I have asked. The answers I have received have

not been satisfactory. I have, in the end, given up asking. The petal-bird opened its eyes. The petal-bird looked at Wren. Wren looked at the petal-bird. The crowd, all five hundred of them in the bottom of the Hollow, drew in a single quiet breath at the same time.

The petal-bird hopped, once, in Wren's palm. The petal-bird took off, with a small soft sound of petals against petals, and flew up the inside of the Hollow, spiraling along the inside of the cone, slowly, slowly, brushing the wall of flowers as it went, and the wall of flowers stirred where it passed. The petal-bird reached the rim of the cone. The petal-bird hovered, for a moment, against the disk of blue sky. The petal-bird flew up into the sky and was gone.

The crowd did not applaud. The crowd did not gasp. The crowd, I noticed when I looked around at them, was crying, quietly, almost all of them, with the same kind of crying that Wren had been doing — the crying that is not sad, the crying that is the body's way of saying yes, the crying that the new city has, I think, made possible in a way the old city would not have allowed.

Mireille's hand was in mine. I had not noticed when they took it. Tov the younger's hand was in Mireille's other hand. We were a small chain of three, at the bottom of the cone of flowers, with Wren in the chair in the clearing in front of us, with the disk of blue sky overhead, with the slow stirring of the flowering wall around us, and we were, for that moment, perhaps the most exactly what we were ever going to be.

Wren closed the box. Wren stood. Wren walked to us through the parting crowd. Wren put their hand on the back of Mireille's neck and their other hand on the back of Tov's neck and they looked at me. They did not need to say anything. I knew what they were saying. I have known ever since.

We climbed the spiral path back up out of the Hollow. The disk of sky grew, slowly, into the whole of the sky. The flowering walls fell away below us. By the time we reached the rim, the day was almost over.

I write: eight. Because four of us came down, and four of us went up. But the eight is for something else. The eight is for what I felt when the petal-bird flew up out of the cone. The eight is, I think now, the number of the moment when I understood that this walk was not a walk in the usual sense, and that this island was not an island in the usual sense, and that this book was not a book in the usual sense, and that all three were instead — and I am writing this very slowly, with the pencil tip going dull — were instead something I would spend the rest of my life trying to describe.

We walk on.

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Chapter Eight: The Quilt

The Lower East Side Mosaic

We sleep that night in a small park I have not yet named, and in the morning we walk east, into what used to be the Lower East Side. This is the neighborhood Mireille is from. Mireille has not told us this. They do not need to. We can see them changing, as we walk, into the version of themselves that they are when they are at home. Their step becomes lighter. They begin to point. Look, they say, that is the bodega where I get my favorite ice. Look, that is the stoop where I sit. Look, that is the bench where my abuela used to wait for me when I got out of school. The abuela is no longer with us. The bench, Mireille is happy to report, has begun, in recent months, to bloom.

The Lower East Side has done something the rest of the lower island has not yet done. The Lower East Side has not, exactly, softened. The Lower East Side has, instead, painted itself. Every roof — and I mean every roof, I have walked the neighborhood, I have counted — every roof of every building in a certain stretch of streets has been painted a different bright color. Pink and blue and yellow and green and orange and red and turquoise and magenta and the deep purple that everyone calls grape. The roofs are not coordinated. The roofs are not designed. The roofs have, I have been told by a person who lived through it, been chosen by the people who live under each roof, one roof at a time, over the course of a few summers, in a long collective act of saying: this one is mine, and I am painting it, and you cannot stop me.

Nobody tried to stop them.

We climb up onto one of the roofs. Mireille knows the way. The way involves a fire escape, an apologetic knock on a kitchen window, a small conversation with the elderly woman who lives in the kitchen and who has known Mireille their whole life, and a final clambering up a metal ladder onto the tar surface of the roof. The tar surface, we discover when we get up there, has been painted yellow. A bright lemon yellow. The yellow of the daisies. The yellow of the column in the Pavilion. The yellow that is, I am beginning to believe, the same yellow everywhere.

From the roof, the Quilt unfolds. To the north, to the east, to the south, to the west, in all directions, the painted roofs spread out — a great patchwork made by no single hand, decided by no single committee, beautiful in the particular way that things are beautiful when many people have agreed, separately and without consulting one another, to do the same kind of thing.

I want to live here, says Tov the younger.

You can, says Mireille. There are empty apartments. There are always empty apartments. My abuela's apartment is empty. You can have it, if you want it.

Tov considers this. Tov, I will learn later, is in fact looking for a place to live. Tov's grandparent — Tov the elder, the keeper of the daisy-fields, who we will meet in some chapters — has been after Tov for some time to find a place of their own. Tov has been resisting. The Lower East Side, with its painted roofs, with its small kitchen apologies, with its empty apartment of an abuela who has gone on to whatever is next, may be the place that breaks Tov's resistance. We will see.

Wren walks to the edge of the roof and sits down with their legs hanging over. I sit down beside them. The street is six stories below. The street is, from up here, a thin gray ribbon between the painted roofs. The street is, also, no longer entirely gray. There are pink shoots coming up from the cracks. There are yellow shoots. The softening is at work here too, but it is at work in cooperation with the painting, and the two are making something together that neither would have made alone.

Wren tells me, while we are sitting at the edge of the roof, the story of how the roofs got painted. I have heard the story before, but I want to write it down the way Wren tells it, because Wren tells it best.

It started, says Wren, with one roof. A pink roof. An old woman painted it. She was eighty-something. Her husband had died. Her grandchildren had moved away. She had a roof and a bucket of pink paint left over from a long-ago project, and she went up there one Saturday morning and she painted the whole roof. It took her all day. She came down for dinner. She told her downstairs neighbor what she had done. The downstairs neighbor did not say anything that night. The downstairs neighbor, the next Saturday, went up and painted their part of the roof orange. The next Saturday after that, the neighbor across the alley painted their roof blue. By the end of the summer the whole block was painted. By the end of the next summer the whole neighborhood was painted. There was no plan. There was no organization. There was, says Wren, an idea, and the idea moved from roof to roof the way a tune moves from one whistler to the next, and after a while the whole neighborhood was whistling the same tune.

The old woman, says Wren, is still alive. She lives over there — and Wren points to a roof a few blocks away that is, I see, a particular shade of pink that is slightly different from the pink of any other roof. The original pink. I should, says Wren, take you to meet her. We will, before we leave this neighborhood. She likes visitors.

Mireille has come to stand behind us. Mireille is, I notice, holding something in their hands. It is the small black seed Ozias gave them in the Tunnel.

I want to plant it here, says Mireille.

This is where we are stopping tonight, says Wren.

Yes, says Mireille.

Then plant it, says Wren.

Mireille goes to the corner of the yellow roof where the tar meets the low parapet. They scrape away a small piece of the tar with their fingernail. They press the seed into the soft fibrous layer underneath. They cover the seed with a pinch of the dust that has gathered in the corner. They sit back. They watch.

I do not know what we are expecting. I am not sure Mireille knows what they are expecting. We sit on the yellow roof, the four of us — Wren and Mireille and Tov and I — and we watch the corner where the seed is buried, and the afternoon goes on, and the painted roofs around us shift very slowly through the long arc of their afternoon colors, and the seed, for some long time, does nothing.

Then it does something.

A small green tendril noses up out of the tar. The tendril is no bigger than a sewing needle. The tendril is no longer than a fingernail. But it is there. It has happened. The seed, given to Mireille by Ozias in the gold light of the Tunnel and carried in the small fold of an inside hem all the way to the Lower East Side, has, on the yellow roof of an apartment building, decided to begin.

Mireille does not cry. Mireille does not laugh. Mireille puts their face down very close to the tendril, so close that I think they may be talking to it, and they stay like that for a long time. Whatever they are saying, the tendril is, in its small green way, receiving.

We will spend the night on the roof. We will spend the next several nights here too. There is, it turns out, a small empty apartment on the top floor of the building that the elderly woman in the kitchen has been keeping ready for some such use, and she insists, when we come down, that we sleep in it. There is one bed. There are blankets. There is a small window that opens onto the painted roof, from which we can, if we lean out, see the corner where the seed has begun.

I write: nine. Because there is the original pink woman, and Wren, and Mireille, and Tov, and me, and the seed, and the tendril, and the abuela who is no longer here but who is also somehow here, and the painted roof — which makes nine, by my counting, depending on how you count.

I am not sure my counting is the right counting. I am not sure counting is the right method at all.

We walk on, eventually. But we stay first. We stay several days. The seed becomes a stem. The stem becomes a small soft thing with three leaves. I do not know yet what it will be. Neither does Mireille. Neither does the seed.

I think this is the whole point.

Chapter Nine: The Mirror

The Chelsea Gallery of Soft Cities

We walk west, after some days, across the lower island, until we come to what used to be Chelsea. The galleries of Chelsea, which once held the contemporary art of the old city, have changed. Most of them are empty. A few have been turned into nurseries — actual plant nurseries, with rows of seedlings under low tables and the smell of damp earth where the smell of new paint used to be. One has been turned into a public bath. One has been turned into a kitchen where soup is served, free, all day, every day, by a rotating cast of volunteers who do not ask for any payment and who refuse, when offered, to take any.

And one — the largest one, the great long converted warehouse on what used to be Twenty-Second Street — has become the Gallery of Soft Cities.

We go in. The light inside is dim, with white track lights washing the walls and the long high industrial ceiling stretching overhead in a webbing of catwalks and cables. The walls hold paintings — bright, abstract paintings of pink and yellow blossoms, made by I do not know whom. The floor holds something else. The floor holds the city.

I will try to describe this carefully.

The floor of the gallery, which is perhaps two hundred feet long, is covered with a shallow pool of black water. Out of the water rise the soft buildings. There are perhaps a thousand of them. Each one is the size of a loaf of bread. Each one is made of a substance that looks, from a distance, like ceramic, but is, when you bend close, something between ceramic and skin. Each one is a color — pink, white, pale yellow, the occasional buttery cream, the occasional peach. Each one is the shape of a small soft tower. They are crowded together in the pool. They form, when seen from the entrance, a city. A small soft city, in shades of pink and yellow and white, floating in a black pool, with the high industrial ceiling of the old warehouse stretching overhead.

It is, I will tell you now, a model of Manhattan. It is, more specifically, a model of what Manhattan is becoming. Each one of the thousand soft towers corresponds to a building or block in the actual city. The location of each soft tower in the pool corresponds to the location of the building in the actual island. The color of each soft tower corresponds to the building's current state of softening — the deeper pink ones are the ones that have softened most completely, the paler yellow ones are the ones that are still in the early stages of becoming. There is, the docents will tell you, a small team of cartographers and

ceramicists who maintain the model. They walk the city. They take notes. They come back to the gallery and they adjust the model, one small soft tower at a time, to keep it true.

Solenne, says Wren.

I do not, at first, see who Wren is greeting. The gallery is full of people, looking down into the pool, walking carefully along the small paths that have been left between sections of the model. Then I see — at the far end of the pool, standing knee-deep in the black water, holding one of the small soft towers in her hand — a tall person in a dark blue smock, with their long hair tied back and their face bent down to the model, adjusting something so small I cannot, from this distance, see what they are adjusting. They look up. Their face changes. They smile.

They wade across the pool to us. The pool, I see when they reach us, is only a few inches deep. They are barefoot. The soft towers part for them as they come, the way the daisies parted for us in the Spill.

This is Solenne, says Wren. Solenne is my — and here Wren pauses, and I see the small pause, and I know what it costs them, and I admire them for it — Solenne is the person I love.

Solenne embraces Wren. Solenne embraces Mireille, who they have not met, but who they greet as if they have. Solenne embraces Tov the younger, who they also have not met, but who they also greet as if they have. Solenne embraces me. Solenne smells, very faintly, of the pool — of the black water, of the soft clay of the small towers — and I will, for the rest of my life, associate that smell with what I will come to think of as the smell of cartography. The smell of someone who is making a map.

Solenne is a cartographer. They are, I think, the cartographer of the new city — there are other cartographers, I do not want to overclaim, but Solenne is the one who has most patiently sat down and tried to understand what the new city is doing in space, and to record what they understand, and to leave their record where other people can find it.

The model in the pool is one of their records. The model is not the only one. Solenne also makes maps on paper — soft maps, they call them, because they are drawn on a kind of paper that has been treated with a wash of pink and yellow pigment that gives it a softness to the eye that no map I have seen before has had. They will show me some of these maps later. They will give me one. I will keep it for years.

But for now we stand at the edge of the pool, the five of us, and we look down at the small soft Manhattan.

I find the Plinth. It is at one end of the pool, large and pink and almost solid, with the six small soft Gatekeepers rising from it in their familiar circle. I find the Pavilion. Its yellow column is there, a small

bright dot. I find the Hollow. Its inverted cone is rendered in the model as a small pink-yellow depression in the floor of the pool, with a tiny disk of blue glass at its bottom. I find the Lower East Side. The Quilt is rendered as a patch of many small bright colors, each one a perfect small square no bigger than a fingernail. Mireille, leaning over, finds the yellow roof where they have planted the seed. There is a small yellow square in the model. There is, in the very corner of the small yellow square, a single pinprick of green.

Mireille looks up at Solenne.

It happened this morning, says Solenne. I was over there. I added it.

How did you know? says Mireille.

I walked past, says Solenne. I saw. I came back.

Mireille is, for the first time since I have known them, almost lost for words. Mireille recovers. Mireille says: thank you.

Solenne bows. The bow is the bow of Ozias, the bow of the children in the Pavilion, the bow that I am beginning to understand is the gesture of the new city. The hands are not pressed together. The hands are open at the sides. The head dips. The eyes close, briefly, and open again. The bow says: I see you. The bow says: I have been seen.

We spend the rest of the afternoon at the pool. Solenne shows me their working method. They show me the small ceramic studio at the back of the gallery, where the soft towers are made. They show me the notebook in which they record their walks. The notebook is, I see, very like my own notebook, only larger, and the pencil they use is a soft graphite that smudges in a way I admire.

Solenne is, I should tell you, also genderqueer non-binary. They use the pronouns they and them, as I do, as Wren does, as Mireille does, as Tov the younger does. I tell you this because I want you to know that we are not, on this walk, an unusual group. We are, in the new city, a quite usual group. There are many groups of us. We are everywhere. We have always been everywhere, but in the old city we were less visible to one another, and in the new city we are more visible. The softening has made us more visible. Or we have made the softening. I do not, even now, know which way the causation runs.

When the gallery closes at six, Solenne comes with us. We are five now, walking north. The afternoon is gold. The pool of the gallery is behind us, with its small soft city, with its single pinprick of green.

I write: ten. There are five of us walking, but the ten is for something else. The ten is for the fact that, in the gallery, I saw the whole island at once, in a way I have never seen it before, and I understood — I

think for the first time — what the walk was a walk through. The walk was through a body. The island was a body. The five of us were inside the body. The body was alive.

I am not embarrassed to write this down. I would have been embarrassed, once. The new city has taken my embarrassment from me, very gently, the way Solenne takes a small soft tower from the pool to adjust it: with no fuss, with no shame, with a small bow of acknowledgement, and then the tower goes back into the water, and the water is the same and is also slightly different.

We walk on.

Chapter Ten: The Reverberation

The Yellow Bell at Hudson Yards

North of the gallery, the streets begin to widen, and the buildings begin to be taller, and we come to what used to be Hudson Yards. I will not go into the history of Hudson Yards. The history is, I think, the least interesting thing about the place. The interesting thing is what has happened to it now.

The great glass buildings of Hudson Yards, the office towers and the shopping center and the strange copper-colored sculpture that everyone used to climb, are still mostly there. The buildings have softened, slightly, around their edges. The sculpture is now overgrown with a kind of pink vine that the botanists have not yet named. But the new thing at Hudson Yards is not in the buildings or the sculpture. The new thing at Hudson Yards is in one of the warehouses on the western edge of the complex, hard up against where the river used to be cleaner. It is the Bell.

The warehouse, when we enter it — Wren leading the way, Solenne close behind, Mireille and Tov bouncing on either side of me — is enormous. The ceiling is perhaps seventy feet overhead, supported by gray industrial trusses. The walls are pink fringe — not the pink fringe of the Pavilion, but something close. The floor is concrete, polished. And from the ceiling, in the center of the warehouse, hanging by what appear to be six thin pink cables, is the Bell.

The Bell is yellow. It is the yellow of the column in the Pavilion. It is the yellow of the daisies in the Spill. It is the yellow of the seed that Ozias gave me. The Bell is, in shape, a cylinder — taller than it is wide, perhaps forty feet tall, perhaps thirty feet across, open at the top and open at the bottom, like a great soft drum that has been pulled into a tube. The Bell is glossy. The Bell has the slight mirror-finish of the column in the Pavilion. The Bell reflects, in long dim warped streaks, the pink fringe walls of the warehouse and the small slow shapes of the people walking on the concrete floor below it.

Beneath the Bell, when we approach, there is a sound. The sound is not loud. The sound is, in fact, almost beneath hearing. But the sound is there. It is a continuous low tone, perhaps the tone of a cello played very slowly and at very low volume, perhaps the tone of a person humming in their sleep. The sound is coming from the Bell. The Bell is the source of the sound. The Bell is, as its name suggests, a bell, but the Bell is not being struck. The Bell is ringing itself.

We stand under the Bell.

The sound, when you are under the Bell, is different. The sound becomes — and this is hard to describe, but I will try — the sound becomes spatial. The sound becomes a thing with dimensions. The

sound surrounds you. The sound moves through you. The sound does not change in volume, and yet it changes in something else, in some quality I cannot name, a quality that has to do with the way the sound is touching the inside of your chest and the inside of your skull and the inside of the small space behind your sternum where the breath lives.

Mireille reaches up. They cannot reach the Bell — the Bell is far overhead, the bottom rim of the Bell is perhaps thirty feet above us — but they reach toward it anyway. Their hand is open. Their face is tilted up.

I feel it, says Mireille.

I feel it too, says Tov.

I feel it, says Solenne. They always feel it.

Wren feels it. I feel it. We all feel it.

What we feel — I will try to put it into words, though I know the words will not be quite right — what we feel is a kind of resonance in the body. The Bell rings at a frequency that the body has, apparently, been waiting for. The body, on hearing the frequency, begins to ring back. Not audibly. There is no sound coming from us. But internally, in the long hollow tubes of our bones and the soft drum of our chests and the small bright bell of our skulls, we are ringing.

It is, I will tell you, the most physical thing I have ever experienced. The most physical thing I have ever experienced. I mean it. More than running. More than swimming. More than sex. More than crying. The Bell rings me, and I ring back, and I am, for the duration of the ringing, more in my body than I have ever been.

I look at Wren. Wren is crying again, in the way they were crying in the Hollow, with the soft wet eyes and the small smile. I look at Mireille. Mireille is laughing — a quiet laughter, not the loud laughter of a child, but the older laughter of a person who has just understood something they have long wanted to understand. I look at Tov. Tov is sitting down. They have sat down on the polished concrete floor of the warehouse, cross-legged, and they are looking up at the Bell with their hands resting on their knees, palms up, and they are perfectly still. I look at Solenne. Solenne is looking at me. They are smiling. Their hand finds mine and squeezes it. They have been here before, many times. They know what the Bell does. They are watching me have it for the first time.

We stay under the Bell for a long time. I do not know how long. Time, under the Bell, behaves the way it behaved in the Tunnel — slowly, with great patience, with no apparent interest in moving forward at the usual speed.

Eventually we walk out. Or rather Solenne walks out, and we follow her, because Solenne is the one who knows how to know when the Bell is done with you. The Bell, I have come to understand, lets you go at a particular moment. You can stay longer if you want. But Solenne can sense the moment of letting-go, and Solenne walks out when the moment arrives, and we follow.

Outside the warehouse, the afternoon light strikes us like a small bright hammer. We blink. We breathe. We have, in a way I can only call physical, been emptied. The walking, the conversations of the day, the small accumulated noise of being in the world — all of it has been emptied out of us by the Bell. We stand on the sidewalk of what used to be a busy street in Hudson Yards and we breathe.

What does it do? I ask Solenne.

It rings us, Solenne says.

Yes, I say. I know. But what does the ringing do.

It tunes us, Solenne says. It is a tuning fork. The new city has a frequency. We have, all of us, the frequency too. The Bell strikes the note. We come into tune.

Into tune with what, I ask.

With each other, Solenne says. And with the island. And with — and Solenne pauses here, and looks up at the sky — and with whatever is making the island do this. I do not know what is making the island do this. I do not need to know. The Bell is enough.

We walk on. The five of us. The afternoon stretching long. The Bell behind us, ringing itself, ringing the few people who are still standing under it, ringing them into tune with the slow new music of the place.

I write: eleven. There are five of us still. The eleven is for the eleven notes I am hearing, faintly, in my chest, as we walk away. I do not know where the notes are coming from. I do not need to know. The notes are enough.

We walk on.

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Chapter Eleven: The Beginning of Daisies

The Bryant Park Daisy-Field

North of Hudson Yards, walking east now, the five of us come to what used to be Bryant Park, and we come to it in the late morning, and I will tell you that I have walked many places in many cities and I have never had the experience I had on the morning we walked into Bryant Park.

The park has been raised. I mean this literally. The level of the park, which used to be a few feet below the surrounding streets, has been brought up to a few feet above them, and the whole park is now a kind of soft green plateau that you climb up onto by a low set of pink stairs. The plateau is a daisy-field. End to end. From the back of what used to be the library to the avenue on the far side. Daisies. Thousands of them. Hundreds of thousands. White petals, yellow centers, stems the green of new lettuce, all of them perhaps three feet tall, all of them densely packed, all of them facing south.

Around the edges of the daisy-field, the skyscrapers of midtown rise in their usual ranks. The Empire State Building is visible to the south. The Chrysler Building is visible to the east. The towers of what used to be Forty-Second Street are visible all around. But the daisy-field, on its low pink plateau, has so completely changed the proportion of the place that the skyscrapers look — and Wren has been waiting for me to notice this — the skyscrapers look like the supporting cast. The daisies are the star.

We climb the pink stairs.

There is, at the top of the stairs, a small wooden sign. The sign says, in a hand I now recognize as Ozias's: WELCOME TO THE BEGINNING OF DAISIES.

This is, says Wren, the first place in the city where the daisies grew. Before they were anywhere else. Before they were on Roosevelt Island and at the East River and at Kips Bay and at Murray Hill. They were here first. This is where they began.

Why here, I ask.

Because the library, says Wren.

I do not understand. Wren explains. The library — the great stone library that has stood on this corner for over a century, with its lions and its reading rooms — is built directly on top of the old Croton Reservoir. The reservoir was filled in. The library was built on top. And beneath the library, in the long horizontal vaults where the reservoir water used to lie, there has always been a particular dampness, a particular cool, a particular soil-condition that, when the softening began, turned out to be the exact soil-condition that the daisies wanted. The daisies came up first in the cracks of the old reservoir floor.

They moved upward through the foundations of the library. They came up through the marble floor of the reading rooms. The librarians, when they noticed, did not pull the daisies out. The librarians watered them. The daisies thanked the librarians by spreading. By the next spring, they had moved out into the park.

Ozias is here, says Solenne.

I had not seen Ozias. Solenne points. Across the daisy-field, on a small wooden platform raised perhaps a foot above the flowers, the seed-keeper is standing. Fae are wearing the green coat. Fae are holding the wooden box. Fae are looking at us.

We wade through the daisies. The daisies, as they did in the Spill, part around our knees, then around our waists. By the time we reach the platform, we are flower-stained to the chest with pollen — yellow stripes across our shirts, yellow dust on our hands, yellow smudges on our cheeks where we have, without thinking, brushed our faces with our hands.

Hello, Ozias says. I have been waiting for you.

We have been walking, Wren says.

I know, Ozias says. I have been keeping count. You are at the halfway point.

I had not realized. We have, over the long weeks since the Gatekeepers, walked perhaps half the length of the island. The numbers feel wrong — half? — but I check Solenne's map later that evening and Solenne confirms it. Half. The Bryant Park daisy-field is, by the geographies of the new city, the middle of the walk.

Ozias opens the wooden box. The seeds today are different from the seeds in the Tunnel. These are larger seeds. These are pale and ridged, like miniature peach pits. There are perhaps twenty of them.

Each of you, says Ozias, take one.

Wren takes one. Mireille takes one. Tov takes one. Solenne takes one. I take one.

These, says Ozias, are not seeds for planting. These are seeds for carrying.

For carrying how long, says Mireille.

Until you know, says Ozias.

Mireille frowns. Mireille puts the seed in their pocket. The pocket is bigger now — Mireille is wearing different clothes than they were on the day we met, the small parchment t-shirt has long since been replaced by a soft pink shirt with a real pocket — and the seed goes in among the other things Mireille

has been collecting on the walk. A small flat stone from the Plinth. A piece of yellow scale from the Tunnel. A single white petal from one of the soft towers at the gallery, which Solenne broke off for them. The collection has been growing. The pocket has been growing with it.

Ozias steps down from the platform. The five of us — six, now, with Ozias — wade together toward the center of the field.

In the very center of the field, there is a circle of daisies that has been left short. The daisies in the circle have been allowed to grow only ankle-high. The circle is perhaps thirty feet across. The circle is, I see when we reach it, the same circle as the wooden chair circle at the bottom of the Hollow. The same diameter. The same purpose, I think, though here in the field there is no chair, no box, no spiraling crowd.

We sit. The six of us. In the short-daisy circle in the center of the tall-daisy field.

There is nothing for me to add, Ozias says, after we have sat for a while in silence. This is the middle. This is the place where the walk pauses, briefly, and looks back at itself, and looks ahead at the second half. There is nothing to do here except to be here.

We do that. We sit. We are.

I will tell you, because I want to be honest, that I cried in the daisy-field. I do not cry easily. I have not cried since my mother died, fourteen years ago, except for one quiet evening last fall when I cut my hand chopping garlic and surprised myself with a small bright spurt of tears that lasted only as long as it took me to find a bandage. But in the daisy-field, in the short-daisy circle, with Wren on one side of me and Solenne on the other and Mireille and Tov and Ozias making out the rest of the circle, I cried. I cried for a long time. I cried in the way Wren had cried in the Hollow — the crying that is not sad, the crying that is the body saying yes — and I cried also, I will tell you, for my mother. I cried for the years I had not cried. I cried for the half of the walk that lay behind me and the half of the walk that lay ahead and the strange certainty that, although I did not know who I was going to be by the end of the walk, I was already, in this short-daisy circle, beginning to be that person, and the person was a person I had not yet met but whom I was looking forward to meeting.

Nobody said anything to me while I was crying. They did not look at me. They did not look away. They sat. They were. They let the field hold me, because the field could hold me, and they trusted the field.

When I stopped crying, Wren put their hand on my hand. Wren did not say anything. The hand was warm, and a little dusted with yellow, and the warmth said what needed to be said.

We left the field in the early afternoon. Ozias did not come with us. Ozias had other business at the field — the daisies needed checking, fae said, and there were some new seedlings near the eastern edge that needed transplanting. Fae promised to find us again before the end of the walk. We trusted faer.

We climbed down the pink stairs. The field receded behind us. We walked east into what used to be Murray Hill. The light was very bright.

I write: twelve. I am not sure why twelve. I am writing the number because the number has begun to feel like a prayer. Each chapter, a number. Each number, an offering. I do not believe in offerings, exactly, but I have begun, in the new city, to suspect that some of the old practices I have not believed in were practices I should not have stopped doing. The new city is teaching me to do them again. The new city is teaching me to count, and to bow, and to put my bare feet on the ground.

We walk on.

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Chapter Twelve: The Sky-Garden

The Midtown Balloon-Sky

What I have come to call the Sky-Garden is, in the early afternoon of the day we leave Bryant Park, hanging in the air above what used to be the corner of Forty-Eighth and Lexington. I say "in the early afternoon" because the Sky-Garden, like the Pavilion, has a habit of moving. The Sky-Garden is, in some moods, at one corner of midtown; in other moods, at another corner; sometimes at no corner at all but suspended over an avenue, floating slowly north or south depending on what it has decided that day to do.

It is, in its physical aspect, a great cloud of balloons. Pink and yellow and white and the occasional cream. The balloons are perhaps the size of a person's torso. The balloons are tied — and this is the part that is hard to describe — the balloons are tied together in the precise shape of an enormous floating cloud, perhaps two hundred feet across, perhaps eighty feet thick, hovering between the rows of skyscrapers at a height of perhaps two hundred feet, casting a pink and yellow shadow on the street below.

Beneath the shadow of the Sky-Garden, when we arrive, there is a crowd. The crowd is dense. The crowd fills the entire avenue from sidewalk to sidewalk, and stretches for two blocks in each direction. The crowd is not moving. The crowd is looking up.

We add ourselves to the crowd. We look up.

The Sky-Garden is, I should say, alive. I do not mean that the balloons themselves are alive — I do not think they are, though I am not, in the new city, entirely sure of any of these things anymore — but I mean that the Sky-Garden as a whole has a kind of slow purposeful motion that is the motion of a living thing. The balloons rearrange themselves, slowly, in small soft shifts. The cloud takes new shapes. For a moment, when we first look up, the cloud is in the rough shape of a daisy — a circle of white balloons around a center of yellow. Then the cloud shifts. The cloud becomes a long oval, like a fat fish. Then the cloud becomes — I am not making this up, Solenne is taking notes beside me — the cloud becomes the shape of a heart.

The crowd does not gasp. The crowd does not point. The crowd, I understand, is used to the Sky-Garden. The crowd has seen it do many shapes. The crowd is here for some other reason, which I will discover in a moment.

The reason is this. Once a day, at a time that nobody can predict exactly but which generally falls between noon and three in the afternoon, the Sky-Garden lets go of a single balloon. The balloon — chosen, as far as anyone can tell, by the Sky-Garden itself — separates from the cloud and floats slowly down to the street. The crowd watches it come down. Whoever the balloon comes down to is the person the Sky-Garden has chosen that day. The balloon has, attached to its string, a small piece of paper. The paper has, written on it in a hand that nobody recognizes, a single sentence. The sentence is for the chosen person.

People come from all over the city to be in the crowd under the Sky-Garden, in the hope of being the one the balloon comes to. Most people are not chosen. Most people stand under the Sky-Garden many times, over many months, before they are chosen. Some people are never chosen. Some people, who have not come to be chosen, who have come only to watch other people be chosen, are nonetheless chosen on their very first day, and they receive the balloon in confusion, and they read the sentence on the paper, and they go away changed.

We stand in the crowd. We look up.

The cloud shifts. A balloon detaches. The balloon is one of the small yellow ones. The balloon comes down slowly, very slowly, drifting in a long lazy spiral, sometimes pausing as though uncertain, sometimes resuming its descent. The crowd is silent. The crowd watches the balloon come. The balloon is coming, I see — and I look around, and Wren has seen the same thing, and Solenne has too, and Mireille is gripping my hand without realizing they are gripping it — the balloon is coming straight for us.

The balloon reaches Tov.

Tov the younger, the ten-year-old, the grandchild of the elder Tov whom we are still some chapters away from meeting, holds out their hand. The balloon settles into their palm as gently as a moth. Tov closes their fingers around the string. The crowd, around us, lets out a long collective breath. Tov is smiling. Tov is, very calmly, untying the small piece of paper from the string.

Tov reads the paper. Tov does not, at first, say anything. Tov reads the paper again. Tov hands the paper to Wren.

Wren reads the paper. Wren hands the paper to me. The paper says, in a small careful hand:

YOU ARE ALLOWED.

That is the whole sentence. There is nothing else on the paper. The paper is small, perhaps two inches by three, with the edges very slightly torn, the kind of paper that has been pulled from a notebook by hand and not cut. The hand that wrote the sentence is not a hand I recognize. The hand is, in fact, not

quite like any hand I have ever seen. The letters are clean and sure and a little bit tilted, as if the writer were leaning over the page from a slight angle. The pencil is dark.

Mireille is reading over my shoulder. Mireille reads the sentence. Mireille puts their hand to their mouth.

Solenne is reading too. Solenne is smiling. Solenne, I will discover later, was chosen by the Sky-Garden many years ago, near the beginning of the softening, and the sentence the Sky-Garden gave Solenne is a sentence Solenne carries always in their pocket. They will show it to me, eventually. The sentence Solenne received is: YOU WILL MAKE THE MAPS.

Tov looks up at the Sky-Garden. The cloud has, in the moment since the balloon detached, shifted again. The cloud is now in the shape of — and this seems somehow almost too apt to be accidental, but the new city does these things, and I have stopped being surprised — the cloud is now in the shape of a small hand, with its fingers open, palm down, as though about to set something free.

Wren puts their hand on Tov's shoulder. Tov is, I see, very still. Tov is taking the sentence in.

Allowed to what, Tov says, after a while.

Whatever you have not been letting yourself do, Wren says.

Tov does not, in that moment, tell us what they have not been letting themselves do. Tov will tell me later. Tov is going to tell their elder, when we meet the elder Tov at the daisy-fields, that they want to live on the Lower East Side, in the apartment of Mireille's abuela, and they want to learn to paint roofs, and they do not want to be expected to take over the daisy-fields of Randall's Island, because the daisy-fields are the elder's love and not theirs, and the daisy-fields belong to whomever loves the daisy-fields. Tov has been afraid, for some months, that telling the elder this will be a great betrayal. The Sky-Garden, with its one-sentence note, has given Tov the permission Tov could not give themselves.

We do not yet know all of this, standing under the cloud. We know only that Tov has been chosen, and that the sentence is YOU ARE ALLOWED, and that Tov is folding the small paper now and putting it in their pocket, very carefully, where it will live for the rest of Tov's life.

The crowd begins to disperse. Whatever the crowd came for has, for today, happened. The Sky-Garden is still overhead, still slowly shifting through its sequence of shapes, but the balloon-event is over, and the people are going about their afternoons. We are going about ours.

We walk out from under the Sky-Garden. The shadow of it falls behind us. The sun, when we step out from beneath it, is warm on our faces in a way I had not realized I had missed.

Tov walks between Mireille and Solenne. Tov is, I notice, walking differently. Slightly taller. Slightly straighter. Allowed.

I write: thirteen. I am not certain about thirteen. Some people think thirteen is unlucky. I do not, anymore, believe in luck. The new city has cured me of many beliefs I am glad to be cured of, and the belief in luck is one of them. There is no luck. There is only what is allowed. Tov is now allowed. We are all now allowed.

We walk on.

Chapter Thirteen: The Field of the Empire

The Empire Daisy-Fields of Murray Hill

The Empire State Building, which used to be the tallest building in the city, is still very tall. It is not the tallest anymore. The new towers down by the harbor have surpassed it, and the new pink towers at the Battery, while not as tall, have a softer authority that makes the Empire State seem, by comparison, like an elderly relative who is much loved but who is no longer asked to do the heavy lifting. The Empire State, I will tell you, does not seem to mind. The Empire State has, in the long years since the softening began, taken on a kind of quiet dignity, the dignity of a building that knows itself and is not, anymore, trying to prove anything.

It is, I think, the building I love most on the island. I will not apologize for this. The reasons are partly mine and partly the building's. The reasons are not the point of this chapter.

The point of this chapter is the field that has grown up at the foot of the Empire State Building.

We approach the field from the south, walking up what used to be Park Avenue. The avenue is mostly grass now, with a path of soft sand running down its middle, and the buildings on either side have been allowed to bloom — pink and yellow and white, with the occasional electric coral, with the occasional deep magenta, all of them tinted differently from one another, all of them looking like the side-faces of an enormous patchwork quilt that has been stood on its edge. We have, in the chapters since the Sky-Garden, walked through a city that is becoming more and more itself with every block we cross. The blooming is denser now. The softening is more complete. We are inside the new city in a way we were not, in the financial district, inside it. The new city has, by the time we reach Murray Hill, become the only city.

The field begins suddenly. One block we are walking on the sandy path of what used to be Park Avenue. The next block, the avenue opens out into a great low plateau of daisies, with the Empire State Building rising directly out of the field like a slate-gray finger pointed at the sky. The daisies are tall — chest-high, as they were in the Spill — and they extend in every direction for several blocks. The Chrysler Building is visible to the northeast, also rising out of the field. The other midtown towers are visible too, here and there, rising up out of the field at intervals, like islands rising from a flat green sea.

I stop walking. I want to look. The others stop with me.

I have never, in my life, seen anything like this. I have seen photographs of the building. I have seen the building from many angles and at many times of day. But I have not, until this moment, seen the

building in the field. The field changes the building. The field puts the building in the right relationship to itself. The field says, here, this is what you were always for. You were always meant to be the upright thing in the middle of the daisies.

Wren is watching me. Wren says, quietly: take your time.

I take my time. I stand. I look. I write.

A little bird, says Mireille, after a while, and they point.

There is a small pink-yellow bird sitting on the head of one of the daisies near us. The bird is not, when I look at it carefully, a real bird. The bird is the same kind of petal-bird that came out of the box in the Hollow. The bird is looking at me. The bird is, I think, the same bird, though I will never be able to prove this. The bird opens its small petal-beak. The bird sings.

The song is the song of the Pavilion. The song the children were humming. The song that the docent told me was the song everyone knows and nobody has ever heard before. The bird is singing it now, on the head of a daisy, in the field at the foot of the Empire State Building, on an afternoon I will remember for as long as I have a memory.

We walk into the field.

The daisies here, as in the Spill, part around us as we move. But the daisies here have a different quality. The daisies in the Spill were, I felt, welcoming us — drawing us in, gathering us into the bowl of the park. The daisies in the field of the Empire are not gathering us. The daisies in the field of the Empire are letting us through. The daisies are saying: pass, witness, go on. We are not the destination. The building behind us is not the destination. The walk is the destination. Keep walking.

This is, says Solenne, beside me as we walk, what I love most about this field.

What, I ask.

The way the field does not hold you, says Solenne. The way the field encourages you to move through it. Some places in the new city are places to stop. The Pavilion is a place to stop. The Hollow is a place to stop. The Bell is a place to stop. But the field is a place to pass. It is a place that exists in order to be passed through. I think that is a kind of holiness too. Not all holiness is the holiness of arrival. Some holiness is the holiness of the road.

I write this down. I underline it. I underline it twice. The pencil tip breaks. I sharpen the pencil with the small knife I keep in my coat for this purpose, and I write Solenne's sentence again, in a fresh part of the page, in larger letters. Some holiness is the holiness of the road.

We walk for perhaps an hour through the field. The Empire State Building, which we have been moving toward, slowly takes its place at the center of the sky. We pass under it. The shadow of the building falls on us. The shadow is gray, ordinary, the same kind of shadow a building of that size has always cast. But the shadow falls across the daisy-field, and the daisy-field, in the shadow, is a different color from the daisy-field in the sun — the petals are paler, the centers more orange than yellow, the whole field cooler and more solemn — and I understand, walking through the cool solemn shadowed field, that even the shadow of the building has been given a job by the new city. The shadow is the place where the daisies show you a different version of themselves. The shadow is also part of the garden.

On the far side of the building, the sun returns. The field returns to its bright daytime version. The bird that has been following us — I have not mentioned this, but the small petal-bird, after singing on the daisy-head, has been keeping pace with us as we walk, hopping from daisy to daisy in a slow zigzag that has been roughly matching our speed — the bird flutters up onto Mireille's shoulder. The bird sits there.

Mireille does not move. Mireille is afraid, I think, that the bird will leave if they move. The bird does not leave. The bird sits on Mireille's shoulder for the rest of the afternoon. The bird is sitting there when we leave the field, two hours later, on its northern edge. The bird is still sitting there when we make camp that evening, in a small soft hollow Solenne knows about, on the bank of what used to be the East River.

That night, Mireille falls asleep with the bird on their shoulder. The bird, in the moonlight, looks very much like a real bird. The bird closes its eyes. The bird, I think, sleeps too.

I write: fourteen. There are five of us walking, six counting the bird. The fourteen is for what I felt when the shadow of the Empire fell across us and the field became its other version. The fourteen is, in some sense I cannot name precisely, for the recognition that there is no version of the new city that is not the new city. The light version is the new city. The shadow version is the new city. The crying-version of myself and the smiling-version of Mireille and the still-version of Tov and the watchful-version of Solenne and the always-walking version of Wren are all the new city. We are inside it. We have, perhaps, become it.

We walk on.

Chapter Fourteen: The Sea

The Daisy Sea at Kips Bay

North and east of the Empire State, the daisy-field thins for a few blocks, becomes ordinary green park, becomes a few blocks of small soft pink-roofed houses, and then opens out again into what the people of the new city call the Sea.

The Sea is not water. The Sea is daisies. The Sea is daisies in such density and such depth that you cannot, when you stand at its edge, see anywhere a single inch of ground between them. The Sea is daisies stem-to-stem, leaf-to-leaf, petal-to-petal, in a great horizontal expanse that runs from the eastern slope of what used to be Kips Bay all the way down to the bank of what used to be the East River. The Sea is, I have heard estimated, three million daisies. I do not know how the estimating was done. I do not, when I am standing at the edge of the Sea, want to count.

The Empire State Building is visible behind us. The light is the morning light of the next day. We have slept on the bank of the river, and the bird has slept on Mireille's shoulder, and we have woken in the cool gray hour before dawn, and we have walked to the edge of the Sea, and we are standing at it now.

The Sea, says Wren, is for swimming.

I had not understood. I understand now. The daisies of the Sea are, although there are three million of them and although they extend as far as the eye can see, only chest-high. You can walk into them. You can wade into them. You can, if you take off your clothes, swim into them — not literally swim, of course, you are walking, but the action of moving through them with your arms held out and your hands brushing the petals is enough like swimming that the people of the new city call it swimming. They say: I went swimming in the Sea yesterday. They mean: I walked into the field of three million daisies until I could no longer see the edge.

We swim.

Mireille goes first. They are, of all of us, the smallest. The daisies come up to their neck. The petal-bird on their shoulder rises slightly to keep its head clear of the petals. Mireille wades out into the Sea with their arms held out at their sides, palms down, fingertips brushing the tops of the flowers. They become smaller. They become smaller still. After a while, Mireille is just the small dark dot of their head and the small bright dot of the bird above it, moving slowly through a white-and-yellow ocean.

Tov goes next. Tov is a little taller. The daisies come to Tov's chin. Tov does not hold out their arms. Tov walks with their hands in their pockets, with the small folded paper from the Sky-Garden in one pocket and the bone-colored seed from Bryant Park in the other.

Solenne goes. Solenne is taller still. The daisies come to Solenne's sternum.

Wren goes.

I go last.

The daisies come, on me, to just below my collarbone. The petals, as I move through them, brush my chest in a way that I find — and I do not know how to say this without saying it — that I find tender. The daisies are touching me with the kind of attention that I have not been touched with in some time. Not a sexual attention. Not the touch of a lover. A different kind of touch. The touch of a great many small soft things, each one paying brief, sincere attention to the small soft thing that I am.

I begin to cry again. I am crying again. I have, on this walk, cried more than I have cried in my entire life put together, and I do not feel like I have cried enough.

Solenne has stopped, perhaps thirty feet ahead of me. They have turned. They are watching me come. They wait until I reach them. They take my hand under the petals, where nobody else can see. They squeeze my hand. They say, quietly: I know.

We swim out. The five of us, with the bird, slowly moving through the Sea, with the city around us softening into a hazy ring of low pink towers and far gold light, with the sound of the city — the sound of the new city, which is the sound of breath, which is the sound of the Pavilion humming, which is the sound of the Bell ringing — coming up at us out of the petals as though the petals themselves were making the sound.

We do not, in the Sea, talk to each other. There is no talking. There is only the swimming, and the breathing, and the slow continuous low sound of three million daisies being themselves.

After some time — I cannot say how long, time does what it does in the new city, which is not what it did in the old — we come, all five of us, into the same place. A small natural clearing, perhaps ten feet across, in the middle of the Sea. The clearing has not been made. The clearing has, simply, occurred. The daisies have, here, decided to grow shorter than elsewhere. The ground is visible. The ground is pink sand. The ground is warm.

We sit on the pink sand. The bird hops down from Mireille's shoulder to the sand. The bird walks in a small circle, the way a real bird walks. The bird sits down with its small petal-feet folded under it.

Wren takes from their pack a small loaf of bread, which Solenne baked the night before in a small stove Solenne carries with them for the purpose. Solenne takes from their pack a small jar of honey, which was given to us at the Pavilion of pink fringe by one of the docents. Mireille takes from their pocket a single daisy petal that they have been carrying since the Spill, the original Spill, the one we walked through on the second chapter. The petal is, after all this time, still bright white. The petal is, after all this time, still slightly damp at the tip.

We share the bread. We share the honey. The petal Mireille places on the sand at the center of our circle, like an offering, and we do not eat it. The bird, when nobody is looking, picks the petal up in its beak and tucks it under its petal-wing.

This is, says Wren, after we have eaten, the deepest place in the walk.

I had thought the Hollow was the deepest place. I had thought the Bell was the deepest place. I had thought the Pavilion was the deepest place. I have been wrong, I see now, every time. There is no single deepest place. There are many deepest places. Each of them is the deepest place when you are there. Each of them gives way to the next deepest place, which is also the deepest. The depth, in the new city, is not a single depth. The depth is a series of depths. Each one is the bottom. None of them is the bottom.

We sit a long time on the pink sand. The bird tucks its head under its wing and sleeps. We do not sleep, but we come close. There is a kind of half-sleep that is possible only in certain places, and the clearing in the Sea is one of those places. The half-sleep is, I think, the closest I have come, in my life, to what some people mean when they say the word peace.

When we leave the Sea, by the time we leave the Sea, it is afternoon. We have spent the morning in the depth. The light has changed. We come out on the eastern edge of the Sea, where it meets what used to be the bank of the East River, and we stand on the bank and we look at the river, which is, I want to tell you, the bluest blue I have ever seen on a river.

I write: fifteen. We are all of us inside the new city now, swimming or having swum. I do not think I will ever, for the rest of my life, be entirely dry of the daisies. There will be petals in my hair forever. There will be honey on my hands forever. There will be a small bright sound in my chest, the sound of three million daisies being themselves, forever.

We walk on.

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Chapter Fifteen: The Baptism

The Bathing Field at the East River

On the bank of the East River, north of where we have come out of the Sea, the city has done a thing I do not know how to explain. The city has, in a strip perhaps a hundred feet wide and a quarter of a mile long, running along the river-bank with the apartment towers of what used to be the Lower East Side and what used to be the East Village rising behind it, the city has made a place where you can lie down in the flowers and be small.

This is the Bathing Field. This is the Baptism.

The flowers in the Bathing Field are different from the daisies in the Sea. The flowers in the Bathing Field are smaller, denser, more like a great low pillow of yellow pollen-fluff with small white star-flowers scattered throughout. The flowers come up to about the knee of a standing adult. The flowers are soft. They are softer than the daisies. They are, when you sit down in them, the softest thing you have ever sat down in. They are, when you lie down in them, like lying down in a very deep bed of warm dry feathers.

We have been told about the Bathing Field by Solenne, who came here often, in the early years of the softening, when she was first making her maps. We have been told that the Bathing Field is best taken alone. We have been told that the Bathing Field does not work in groups. We have been told to enter the Field at intervals, one at a time, with at least an hour between each entry, so that the Field can do its work without distraction.

Mireille goes first. We walk Mireille to the southern edge of the Bathing Field, and we stop, and we watch Mireille walk in. Mireille walks a little way in. Mireille stops. Mireille turns around once, slowly, looking back at us. Mireille lies down.

For the next hour, we cannot see Mireille. The flowers have closed over them. The Field has taken them in. The petal-bird is sitting on the small white sign at the edge of the Field, watching the spot where Mireille went down. The bird does not move.

We sit, the four of us, on the bank of the river, with our backs to the Field, and we wait. Wren does not say anything. Solenne does not say anything. Tov does not say anything. I do not say anything. There are some kinds of waiting that are not improved by conversation. This is one of them.

After an hour, Mireille sits up. We can see them, suddenly, where they had been hidden: a small dark head emerging from the field of yellow and white. Mireille is smiling. Mireille is laughing, in fact, a small

quiet laughter. Mireille stands up. Mireille walks back to us. Mireille is — and I do not have a better word for this — Mireille is glowing. There is a soft brightness about them that was not there before.

I felt my mother, says Mireille, when they reach us.

We do not, any of us, ask Mireille what they mean. Mireille's mother is still alive, as far as I know. Mireille's mother is, I think, living somewhere in Queens, which we will not visit on this walk. But the mother Mireille felt in the Bathing Field is not necessarily the mother in Queens. The mother Mireille felt may be a different mother. The new city has a way of producing, in certain places, the kind of presence that you most need to feel, and the presence is not always the literal person. I have learned this from talking to many people who have lain down in the Field. Some have felt their grandmothers, their grandfathers, their dead siblings, their dead pets. Some have felt people they have not yet met. Some have felt themselves.

Tov goes next.

We walk Tov to the northern edge of the Field, so that they have a different part of the Field to themselves. Tov walks in. Tov lies down. We wait. After an hour, Tov sits up. Tov walks back. Tov's face is — and this is hard to describe — Tov's face is the face of a person who has been told something they had been waiting their whole life to be told. The face is not different in any feature. The face is the same face. But the face has, behind it, a different person.

What did you feel? says Mireille. Mireille is allowed to ask Tov, in a way that none of the rest of us are, because they are the same age and they are now best friends. They became best friends, I want to say, somewhere between the Pavilion and Bryant Park, and they have been growing more best-friended every day since, and the best-friendship is the kind of best-friendship that I, in my own childhood, watched other children have and was not, for whatever reason of temperament, able to have myself. I am happy for them. I am happy that the new city has made room for them to have it.

I felt the elder, says Tov, in answer to Mireille.

Your grandparent, says Mireille.

Yes, says Tov.

And the elder, says Mireille, said?

The elder said it was alright, says Tov. The elder said I could live where I wanted. The elder said the daisy-fields would find someone else to love them, and that I was allowed — and Tov pauses on the word allowed, because the word has now twice been given to them, once by the Sky-Garden and once in the

Field, and the word is becoming, for Tov, a kind of saint's name — I was allowed to do what I was going to do.

Mireille hugs Tov. The hug is the first hug of two best friends who have just received independent confirmations from the universe that they are going to spend the next phase of their lives near each other. The hug is, in fact, a kind of contract.

Solenne goes next. We walk her to a middle part of the field. She walks in. She lies down. We wait. After an hour, she sits up, walks back to us, and does not, at first, say anything. Her eyes are red. Her cheeks are wet. She has been crying. She sits down beside Wren. She puts her head against Wren's shoulder. Wren does not ask. Wren puts their arm around her. They sit like that, in silence, for some time. Eventually Solenne says, very quietly: I felt the map. I felt the whole map. I felt every place I have ever marked on every map I have ever made. I felt them all at once.

That, says Wren, is a great deal to feel.

Yes, says Solenne. I think I will sleep tonight as I have not slept in some years.

Wren goes next. I walk Wren to another part of the field. Wren walks in. Wren lies down. I walk back to the others. We wait. The waiting for Wren is a longer waiting than the others. The hour passes. The flowers do not stir. We begin to think, after the second hour, that something has happened to Wren, that Wren has fallen asleep in there, or that Wren has, perhaps, not come back. Solenne is on her feet. She is about to walk into the field. She is stopped by the small petal-bird, which flutters off the sign and lands on her shoulder and looks at her, very steadily, with its small black eyes. Solenne understands. Solenne sits back down. We wait.

After another hour, Wren sits up. Wren walks back to us. Wren's face is, I think, the face I will remember when I am old. The face is open. The face is awake. The face has the look of a person who has been let in on the secret. The face will not, I think, ever quite look like its old self again. Wren sits down with us. We do not ask. Wren does not say.

I go last.

I do not, in this book, want to tell you what I felt in the Bathing Field. I want to keep that for myself. I will tell you only that I felt what I needed to feel. I felt also, very briefly, my mother. I felt also, very briefly, a person I am going to become. I felt, I think, the small bright bell that the Bell at Hudson Yards rang in me, the bell that has been ringing ever since, a small soft note in the center of my chest that I now know is going to ring for the rest of my life. The Bathing Field, I think, was the place where the bell stopped being a thing being done to me and started being a thing that I was. I do not know how else to

put it. I am sorry if it is not clear. I have been writing this book for some years now and I have not yet found the clearer way.

When I came back, the others were waiting. The light was beginning to fall. The bird was on Mireille's shoulder again. The river was very blue. We walked away from the Field as the sun was setting behind the buildings of the East Village, and the buildings, which I had thought I knew, looked from the river-bank like a new range of softly colored mountains rising at the end of a long open meadow.

I write: sixteen. I do not write anything else.

We walk on.

Chapter Sixteen: The Welcoming

The Refugee-Tents Turned Garden at Roosevelt Island

On the other side of the East River, lying long and narrow in the middle of the water like a slender boat, is the island of Roosevelt. We cross to it the next morning by the small footbridge that has, since the softening, replaced the old tram. The tram still runs, occasionally, for sentimental reasons, but most people now walk across the soft pink bridge that has grown up between the two banks like a long lateral root.

Roosevelt Island, in the old city, was a strange and quiet place. It had a hospital, a strange high-rise housing project, a ruin, a small park, and a tram that went over the river twice an hour. I had been to it twice in my whole life before the softening, both times by accident. I did not, in the old city, have any reason to go.

Roosevelt Island, in the new city, is something else. Roosevelt Island is where the people who were arriving — and people have been arriving, throughout the softening, in great numbers, from everywhere — Roosevelt Island is where the people who were arriving were first taken in.

The southern half of the island, when we cross over to it that morning, is a great soft field of yellow tents. The tents are not tents in the way I had thought of tents. The tents are not made of canvas, or vinyl, or any other material that tents were made of in the old world. The tents are made of a soft yellow fabric that has, when you press your hand against it, the give and warmth of skin. The tents are domes — small ones for one person, larger ones for a family, a few enormous ones for the gatherings — and they are arranged in long curving rows across the southern half of the island, in patterns that Solenne tells me have been worked out by the people who live in them, slowly, over many seasons, in accordance with which way the wind blows and where the sun comes up.

Around the tents, in long borders, there is pink. There is pink scrub, the kind of low pink ground-cover that I now know is a kind of moss that the new city has produced. There are pink shrubs. There are pink trees, small ones, the size of an apple tree, with pink leaves and pink trunks and small white blossoms in the spring. The tents themselves are yellow and the scrub around them is pink and the river around the island is blue and the sky overhead is bluer still and the whole of Roosevelt Island, seen from the small soft footbridge as we crossed it that morning, was the four-color flag of the new city: pink, yellow, white, and a great deal of blue above and below.

The people on Roosevelt Island, when we walked among them, were of every kind. There were old people and young people, people of every color and every accent and every kind of dress. They had come

from many places. They had come from places where the softening had not yet happened, and they had heard of the softening, and they had come to see if it was true, and they had decided, on arrival, to stay. They had been welcomed. They had been given a tent. They had been given a place in one of the long curving rows. They had been taught — by people who had been taught by people, all the way back to some original teacher whom nobody could now name — they had been taught the simple practices of life on the new island. How to tend the pink scrub. How to bake bread in the small clay ovens that are everywhere. How to listen to the tents.

The tents, I should tell you, are also alive. I think I have stopped, by this point in the book, being surprised when I tell you that something in the new city is alive. The tents are alive. The tents grow, slowly, with their occupants. A tent given to a single person is small. When the person finds a partner, the tent grows. When the partners have a child, the tent grows again. When the child grows, the tent grows. When the people in the tent age, the tent becomes softer, and lower, and more enveloping. The tents are matched to their people. The tents change as the people change. When the people, eventually, in the long course of things, leave the tent — for whatever reason, the death of the body or the move to another place — the tent slowly returns to the earth. It softens further. It sinks. It becomes, in time, the pink scrub.

This, says Wren, as we walk among the tents, is the thing that most needed to happen.

What thing, I ask.

The welcoming, says Wren. The whole softening was a softening so that the welcoming could happen. The towers had to soften, the streets had to soften, the buildings had to bloom, all of it had to happen so that there would be a place to put the people. So that there would be a place soft enough. So that the people, when they came, would have somewhere to lie down.

I have not, before this moment, thought of the softening this way. I had thought the softening was its own purpose — that the island was becoming a garden for the sake of becoming a garden, that the daisies were daisies for the sake of being daisies. I see now that I was wrong. The garden is for the people. The daisies are for the people. The Pavilion is for the people. The Bell is for the people. The entire long soft body of the island is for the people who are arriving, and for the people who are already here, and for the people who will arrive in the years ahead. The island is a great soft welcome.

I write this down. I underline it three times.

We meet, that day, an old woman from one of the places where the softening has not yet happened. Her name is Faiza. She has been on Roosevelt Island for two years. She came from a country I will not name, because she has asked me not to name it, because the country is still a country where the kind of

person she is must be careful. Faiza is, like the rest of us, genderqueer non-binary. They use the pronouns they and them, in English; in their own language, they tell me, there is a different word, a word that has existed in their language for a very long time, but that has, in the country they came from, recently been declared illegal to use. Faiza came to the new city because they had heard, on a small radio in a small back room of a small house in their country, that the new city did not declare anything illegal to use. They came on three boats and two airplanes and a bus. They arrived at Roosevelt Island on a Tuesday afternoon. They were given a small yellow tent. The tent has, since they came, grown twice. Faiza now lives in a tent the size of a small apartment, with a soft yellow floor and three soft yellow rooms and a small clay oven that they use to bake bread for the neighbors. Faiza has, on Roosevelt Island, met a person they love. The person they love is also from a country where the softening has not yet happened, a different country, with a different language, and the two of them communicate, Faiza tells me, in a third language that is neither of theirs but that they have both, over many evenings, agreed upon. The third language is English, with many borrowed words.

I will live here, Faiza tells me, until I die. I will die here. The tent will go back to the ground. There is no other place I want to go.

Wren takes Faiza's hands. Wren says: we are honored to walk through your home.

Faiza smiles. Faiza says: it is also your home. The whole island is your home. The whole city is your home. We are all home now.

I cry, again, on Roosevelt Island. I will tell you that I have stopped, by this point in the walk, being embarrassed by crying. The crying has become a regular part of the walk, like eating and drinking and writing. The crying is, I think, the way the body responds to certain things that the brain has not yet caught up with. The crying is the body's way of catching up faster.

We spend two nights on Roosevelt Island. We stay with Faiza, in their tent. The tent grows, for the two nights, to accommodate us. The tent shrinks, after we leave, back to its previous size. Faiza tells me, in a letter I will receive some months later, that the tent missed us for a week before it remembered how to be its own size again. I have kept the letter. The letter is, like Mireille's seed and the sentence in Tov's pocket, one of the small permanent things I have carried out of the walk.

When we leave Roosevelt Island, by the soft pink footbridge, going north, Mireille is holding the petal-bird and Tov is holding a small pink stone that Faiza pressed into their hand at parting and Solenne is holding a map Faiza drew of the tent-village, with all the names of the residents and the years they came, and Wren is holding nothing, because Wren is the kind of person who has learned to carry what they carry on the inside, where it weighs nothing.

I write: seventeen. We are, the four-going-on-five of us, fuller than we have ever been.

We walk on.

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Chapter Seventeen: The Crown

The Park Pavilion at the Met

We come back to the Manhattan side by the northern bridge of Roosevelt Island, and we walk west, and we come, after a long afternoon's walk through what used to be the Upper East Side, to the great park that runs down the middle of the upper island like a long green tongue. We come, more specifically, to the western edge of the park, where what used to be the Metropolitan Museum of Art stands, and where, at its southern end, the new Pavilion at the Met has risen.

I want to be careful, in writing about the Pavilion at the Met, because this is a place that means a great deal to me personally, and I do not want my feelings about it to crowd out the place itself. I will try, in this chapter, to let the Pavilion speak for itself.

The Pavilion at the Met is a circular building. It is perhaps two hundred feet across. It has, at its base, a low ring of glass — the only glass on the building — through which you can see, when you stand outside it, the interior, which is a great soft circular room with a polished floor and a few small benches around the perimeter. The walls of the building rise from this glass ring as a curving yellow band, perhaps thirty feet tall, painted the same yellow as the column in the Pavilion of pink fringe, the same yellow as the Bell, the same yellow as the column of the Pavilion, the same yellow as the seeds.

Above the yellow band, where the roof of a normal building would be, there is something else. There is a great soft crown.

The crown is made of cylinders. The cylinders are tall, perhaps ten or fifteen feet each, and they are vertical, and they are arranged in a tight cluster on top of the yellow band, so that they rise from the top of the building in a great soft thatched mass. The cylinders are all colors. There are pink ones, white ones, yellow ones, cream ones, the occasional pale orange, the occasional peach. The cylinders are the same diameter — perhaps three feet across — and they are the same height, more or less, and they are packed together so closely that they form, when seen from outside the building, a great soft circular crown of colored cylinders rising from the top of the yellow ring.

The Pavilion at the Met, says Solenne, when we first see it, is the building Aki is proudest of.

Aki is here, says Wren.

Aki is here. We see them when we approach. Aki is standing in front of the Pavilion, alone, looking at it. They have, when we come up to them, the look of a person who has been looking at the same thing for some time and is still, somehow, not done looking. Their hair is gray-streaked, cut short. Their clothes

are loose, soft, pink, the kind of clothes that the new city has gradually drawn most of us into wearing. They turn when Wren says their name.

Wren, Aki says. And — they look at the rest of us, taking in Mireille and Tov and Solenne and me with a single warm nod — and the others.

Aki, Wren says, this is the Pavilion?

This is the Pavilion at the Met, Aki says. Yes.

It is, Wren says, the most beautiful one yet.

Aki smiles. Aki accepts the compliment without false modesty and also without arrogance. Aki is, I will come to know, a person who has worked out a particular relationship with their own work, the relationship of a parent to a grown child — the work is theirs, and the work is also no longer theirs, and the work has gone out into the world and become what it has become, and the parent can take a quiet pride in that becoming without thinking they own it.

We go inside.

The interior of the Pavilion at the Met is, after the bright autumn day outside, a kind of soft golden dimness. The walls glow with the light coming in through the glass ring at the base. The ceiling is the inside of the crown of cylinders, which from underneath look like the underside of a great soft thatched roof, with small gaps between the cylinders through which thin shafts of daylight come down at odd angles, like the sun coming down through a forest of very fat tree trunks. The floor is polished concrete. The few benches around the perimeter are pink.

There are perhaps thirty people in the Pavilion. Some are sitting. Some are walking, slowly, around the inside of the ring. Some are lying on the polished floor, looking up at the underside of the crown of cylinders. None of them are talking. The Pavilion has, like the Bell warehouse, a quality of silence that the people who come into it instinctively honor.

We sit, the five of us, on one of the pink benches.

Aki sits with us. Aki is, I see now that we are close to them, an older person than I had thought when we first saw them outside. Aki is, I will guess, perhaps in their late sixties. Aki has been an architect for a very long time. Aki has, in the new city, become something more than an architect, the way Wren is something more than a gardener, the way Solenne is something more than a cartographer. Aki has become — and this is my word, not theirs — Aki has become a host. The Pavilion at the Met is Aki's house. Aki keeps it for the visitors.

What I want to tell you, Aki says to us, in a low voice, is about the crown.

We listen.

The crown, Aki says, is not what it looks like. It looks, from outside, like a single sculptural element — a great soft thatched mass on top of the building. From inside it looks like a single ceiling — a forest of fat trunks. But the crown is not single. The crown is many.

Aki points up. We follow their finger. The crown above us is, when you look at it carefully, made of separate cylinders — separate, in the sense that each cylinder is its own thing, with its own color, its own slight variation in height, its own small individuality. The cylinders touch. The cylinders lean on each other. The cylinders support each other. But each cylinder is its own.

Each cylinder, Aki says, is a person.

I do not, at first, understand. Aki sees that I do not understand. Aki explains.

Each cylinder, Aki says, was made by a person from this neighborhood. The neighborhood was given the assignment, when the Pavilion was being built: each household would make a cylinder. The household could make their cylinder however they liked — what color, what slight variation in height, what particular small features along the side. The only rule was that the cylinder had to fit the basic dimensions, so that when all the cylinders were brought together, they would fit on top of the Pavilion. The neighborhood made the cylinders. There are, in the crown above us, eight hundred and forty-seven cylinders. There are, in the neighborhood, eight hundred and forty-seven households. The crown is the neighborhood.

I am, after Aki finishes explaining this, unable to speak. I look at Solenne. Solenne is smiling. Solenne knew, already; Solenne has worked with Aki on other projects, and they have been involved in the cataloguing of which cylinder belongs to which household. Solenne is going to give me the catalogue later, and I am going to spend a long evening with it, reading the names and the addresses, looking up at the corresponding cylinders, learning the neighborhood by its crown.

I look at Mireille. Mireille is also looking up. Mireille's mouth is slightly open. Mireille is, I think, working out, in the way an eleven-year-old works out the implications of a new fact, that this kind of building is possible. That a neighborhood can be a building. That the people of a place can, when given the right invitation, build the roof over their own heads, each contributing a single soft cylinder, each one of them keeping their own and also belonging to all the others.

I want, says Mireille, to make one of these in my neighborhood.

You can, says Aki. You will. I will help you, if you like. We are doing it everywhere now.

When Mireille has grown a little older, and when the walk has long ended, and when the new city has moved into a phase of its life that I will only barely glimpse in the years before I die, Mireille and Aki will, indeed, build a Pavilion at the corner of what used to be Delancey and Allen, with a crown of cylinders made by every household in the surrounding ten blocks. I will live to see it. I will be invited, as one of the elders of the walk, to sit on a pink bench in the new Pavilion and to look up at its crown of cylinders, and I will see, among them, a small yellow cylinder with a tiny daisy painted on its side, which is Mireille's own, which Mireille made one Saturday afternoon at the age of seventeen.

We sit, the five of us, with Aki, in the original Pavilion at the Met, for a long time. The light shifts. The shafts of daylight coming down through the gaps between the cylinders move across the polished floor in long slow gold lines. The people in the Pavilion change. Some leave. Others come in. Nobody talks. The silence is the silence of a place that has been built by many hands and that is being inhabited, now, by other hands, and that knows itself to be the meeting of all those hands.

When we leave, the afternoon has long turned to evening. Aki walks us out. Aki bows to us at the door. Aki says: I will see you, again. And we will, I know, see them again. There are not so many of us in the new city who have done this work that we lose track of one another. We will see each other for the rest of our lives.

I write: eighteen. There are five of us walking, going north now, with the autumn light long and gold and the leaves on the trees of the great park beside us beginning to turn the color of pink, the color of yellow, the color of the cylinders. We are, the five of us, a small soft crown on top of a moving building. We are each ourselves. We are also each other. We are a Pavilion of five, walking the island.

We walk on.

Chapter Eighteen: The Forest

The Yellow Forest at the Hudson

We walk north through the great park, and on its western edge, where the park comes down to the Hudson River, the city has done another of the things it has been doing. The city has, along a stretch of perhaps a half-mile of the riverbank, grown a forest of yellow trees.

I want to be careful with the word forest. The trees are not so many that you could not, walking among them, see through to the river on one side and to the apartment buildings on the other. The trees are perhaps a hundred. They are all the same kind of tree — a tree I do not recognize, which Solenne tells me is new, which has come up only in the years of the softening, which has not yet been given a Latin name. The trees are perhaps thirty feet tall. They are slender. Their leaves are small and serrated, the size of a fingernail. Their leaves are bright, fluorescent, lemon-bright yellow. Their leaves have, the botanists have determined, the same color throughout the year. The trees do not turn green in spring. They do not turn yellow in autumn. They are yellow always. The color does not, when you look at it for some time, hurt the eyes. It is a soft yellow, despite its brightness, the kind of yellow that the new city has been showing us in many places by this point in the walk.

We walk into the forest. The light, under the trees, is golden. The light is so saturated with yellow that the white of Mireille's shirt looks pale lemon, and the pink of Solenne's smock looks orange, and the brown of Tov's pants looks like a deep mustard. We are all of us, under the trees, tinted toward the same warm note.

There is a path through the forest. The path is paved with something soft, something I cannot identify, but which gives slightly under my feet, and which is the color of pink sand. The path runs the length of the forest, parallel to the river, and there are small benches at intervals, and there are small clearings where the trees have left a circular space for people to sit and look up. We walk slowly. We pause at intervals. We sit on one of the benches for a long time.

What I want to tell you about, in this chapter, is a particular feeling I had in the yellow forest, which I have not had anywhere else, in my whole life, and which I have been struggling to put into words ever since.

The feeling is this. I had, walking under the yellow leaves, the sudden very clear sense that I had been homesick for this place all my life, without knowing it. I had not been to this forest before. I had not, before the softening, even known this kind of forest existed. The trees were new. The yellow was new.

The path was new. The bench I was sitting on was new. And yet I had, as I sat on the bench, the unmistakable feeling of having come home.

I want to tell you that this is not nostalgia. Nostalgia is for places you have been. This is not nostalgia. This is the recognition of a place you have not been, which is, in some way you do not understand, the place you were always supposed to come to. The new city, in the yellow forest, gave me this recognition. I am not sure the new city always gives it. I am not sure the new city always gives it to everyone. But on that afternoon, on that bench, with the yellow light coming down through the small serrated leaves and pooling on the pink path at my feet, the new city gave it to me.

I sat on the bench for a long time. The others walked on without me. They are good companions in this way. Wren has, in the long months of the walk, taught the others — by example, without saying it — that the walk has its own pace for each walker, and that the walker should be left to walk at their own pace, and that the rest will catch up when the time is right. I will catch up later. They knew this. They walked on.

A woman came and sat on the bench beside me. She was, I will guess, in her seventies. She had white hair cut short. She was wearing a pale yellow dress. She had, in her hands, a small notebook of her own. She did not, when she sat down, say anything to me. She opened her notebook. She began to write. I did not, for some time, say anything to her. I had my own notebook open. I was also writing.

After a while she looked over at me and said: you are walking the island, are you not.

I am, I said.

I thought so, she said. I can tell. There is a way the walkers carry themselves. I have been watching them go by, for years, on the path through this forest. You all have the same look.

What look, I asked.

The look of people who are being changed, she said. Slowly, day by day, by what they are seeing. The look of people who have stopped trying to keep their face the way it was.

I considered this. I closed my notebook. I looked out at the yellow trees and the river beyond and the sky above.

I am Surjan, I said.

I am Iona, she said.

We talked for an hour. Iona had walked the island herself, ten years before, when the softening was newer. She had been the third or fourth person to walk it, she thought; before her, only Wren and a few

of the original gardeners had done the walk. She had written a small book about the walk, which had not been published in the usual way but had been printed and given out, free, by Iona herself, to anyone who asked. I had not read it. I asked her if I could read it. She gave me a copy from her bag. The copy was small, perhaps fifty pages, hand-stitched, with a pink cover and a yellow stripe down the spine. I have it still. I have read it many times. It is a very good book.

When the walk was over for you, I asked Iona, what was different?

Everything was different, she said. And nothing was different. The new city was the new city. I was the new me. The walk had not, in the end, given me anything I did not already have. The walk had only shown me, by walking it, what I already had. That is the gift of the walk. The walk does not give. The walk reveals.

I have thought about this sentence for years. I do not know if I agree with it. I know that I do not, fully, disagree with it. The walk reveals. There is some truth in this. There is also, I think, some giving. Wren gave me the walk. Solenne gave me the map. Mireille gave me a kind of attention I had forgotten I had. Tov gave me the willingness to be allowed. Ozias gave me a seed. The Pavilion gave me a song I had not known. The Bell gave me a tuning. The Bathing Field gave me a long quiet hour with my own grief, which I had been postponing for many years. The walk did not, perhaps, give me any of this in the strict sense — all of it was, perhaps, mine already — but the walk did, in revealing it to me, also give it to me. The two are, I think, the same thing.

I sat with Iona until the light began to dim. We did not, in our hour, exchange many more sentences. We sat. We wrote. We watched the yellow leaves. When the light went, we both stood up at the same time, and we bowed to each other, and Iona walked away to the south, going back the way we had come, and I walked on north, following the path my companions had taken some hours before.

I caught up with them in a small clearing at the northern end of the forest, where they were sitting in a small ring around a fire that Wren had made. Mireille was leaning against Solenne. Tov was lying on their back looking up at the first stars. The petal-bird was perched on the back of a small wooden bench. Wren was tending the fire.

You took your time, Wren said, smiling, when I sat down beside them.

I did, I said.

That is what the forest is for, Wren said.

I write: nineteen. I do not know if there is a number in this book that has cost me more than nineteen. The forest is for taking your time. The walk is for taking your time. The book is for taking your

time. The reader, you, are also for taking your time, in whatever forest, of whatever color, you happen to be sitting in when you read this. I hope you have taken yours. I hope you have stopped, and sat, and let the yellow light fall on you.

We walk on.

Chapter Nineteen: The Spiral

Inwood Hill, the Spiral City

It takes us another full week to walk from the yellow forest to Inwood. I will not tell you about every day of that week. I will tell you only that the walk, in its second-to-last leg, becomes very quiet. The chapters of the walk that I have already told you are the loud chapters. The remaining days are the quiet ones. We walk slowly. We talk less. We eat together in the small soft restaurants that have, in the long course of the softening, opened up in the lower stories of buildings throughout what used to be the Upper West Side and Hamilton Heights and Washington Heights, in places that used to be storefronts and that are now, mostly, small kitchens with eight or ten chairs each and a single rotating cook who serves whatever they have decided to serve that day. We sleep in the small soft inns that have, similarly, opened up, in the upper stories of those same buildings, where for the price of a song — and I mean this literally, the inns ask for a song from each guest in payment, sung at the breakfast table the morning of departure — you can have a bed for the night.

Tov pays for our beds in those weeks. Tov, it turns out, has a beautiful singing voice, and the elder Tov, before they passed it on, was a known singer in the small soft houses of the new city. Tov knows many songs. The innkeepers love them. We are well-fed, well-rested, well-sung-for.

On the eighth day of the slow quiet walk, we come to Inwood.

Inwood is the northern tip of the island. I had not, before the softening, been to Inwood often. I had been there twice, both times to walk in the small wooded park at the very top, where the last natural forest on the island had been preserved. The park is still there. The forest is still there. But Inwood, around the forest, has changed.

What used to be the neighborhood of Inwood is now a great spiral.

I do not know how else to describe it. The streets of Inwood, which were laid out by the old planners in a more or less rectangular grid, have rearranged themselves. I do not know how. Solenne, who is the cartographer, has told me she does not fully know either, even after long months of mapping. What is clear is this: the streets have, slowly, over the long course of the softening, formed themselves into a great loose spiral, with the small park at its center, and with the houses arranged in long curving rows along the arms of the spiral. From the air — I have seen the photographs, Solenne has shown them to me — the spiral is unmistakable. From the ground, walking through it, the spiral is, at first, invisible. You walk along what feels like an ordinary street. Then the street curves. Then the street curves a little more. After a

while, you realize you have been walking in a long slow circle, and the circle is getting smaller. You are spiraling toward the center.

The houses of the spiral are small. They are perhaps two or three stories each, packed close together, with shared walls between them. They are every color. They are not painted in the coordinated way that the Lower East Side roofs are painted — they are painted, instead, in a kind of wild profusion, with each house a different bright color from its neighbors, and with no apparent pattern. There are pink houses next to yellow ones next to bright green ones next to coral ones next to deep red ones. The houses are not all the same shape. Some have flat roofs. Some have peaked roofs. Some have small towers, the size of a closet, rising from one corner. Some have small gardens on their roofs, with small soft daisies and the occasional pink shrub. The houses are crowded together. They lean slightly toward each other, the way the Gatekeepers leaned toward the harbor, the way the Welcomers leaned toward the Spill, the way everything in the new city leans, slightly, toward whatever it loves.

We walk into the spiral. Mireille is excited. They have been hearing about Inwood from Solenne for weeks. They have, in their pocket, a small drawing they have been making, of an imaginary house they want to build someday. The drawing is of a small soft pink house with a yellow door. Mireille is, I think, going to use Inwood as the reference for the actual house, when, in some future year of their grown-up life, they get around to building it.

The spiral takes most of the afternoon to walk. We go in by the outer arm, slowly curving toward the center. The streets are quiet. The people of Inwood — and there are many people of Inwood, the houses are full, the windows are open, the gardens are tended — the people of Inwood are mostly indoors at this hour, in the soft mid-afternoon, when most people in the new city take a small rest. We pass an old man on a bench, who waves. We pass a child playing with a cat, who looks up. We pass two women holding hands, who smile at us and at each other. We pass a small bakery from which the smell of bread is coming out into the street, and we stop, and we buy a loaf, and we eat it as we walk.

The spiral, says Wren, is the last neighborhood of the new city.

The last in what sense, I ask.

The last in the sense of going north, says Wren. There is the park, after this. And then the river. And then the Bronx. The Bronx is, in its own way, beginning to soften — there are reports, there are signs — but the softening of the Bronx is not yet at the stage of the softening of Manhattan. The Bronx is, I think, perhaps ten years behind us. Maybe fifteen. The softening will come there. The softening, I am now sure, comes everywhere, eventually. But for now, the spiral is the northernmost soft neighborhood.

I write this in my notebook. I underline it once.

We reach the center of the spiral as the sun is beginning to fall toward the west. The center is a small open plaza, paved with the soft pink material that is the same material as the path in the yellow forest. There is a low stone wall around the plaza. There is, on the wall, an inscription. The inscription is in the hand of Ozias.

It says: YOU HAVE ARRIVED.

That is the whole inscription. There is nothing else.

We sit down on the wall around the plaza. The four of us, with the petal-bird. We do not say anything. We look at the inscription. We look at the spiral around us, with its houses leaning gently inward, with the small windows beginning to light up as the evening comes, with the slow soft sounds of people coming out into their gardens to water their plants and breathe the cooler air of the falling day.

We have arrived, says Mireille, finally.

We have, says Wren.

I had not known, says Mireille, that we were going to arrive.

That is, says Wren, the nature of arrival. You do not know you have arrived until you have arrived. And then you know.

We sleep that night in a small house at the very center of the spiral, in a house that has been kept, for many years, by a person named Tamsin, who is one of the elders of the new city, and who knew that we were coming, because Ozias had sent word. Tamsin gives us each a bed. Tamsin gives us, also, a soft yellow blanket each, because the nights in Inwood are cool, and because Tamsin loves her guests, and because the new city has taught all of us to love guests in the particular way that Tamsin loves them.

I lie awake for a long time in the soft small bed under the soft yellow blanket. I write, by the light of a small soft lamp, the chapter you have just finished reading. I write the number twenty. I have, I think, only one more chapter to go.

The walk has, almost, arrived. The book has, almost, arrived. I have, almost, arrived. The petal-bird is sleeping on the windowsill. The spiral is quiet around me. The night is full of stars.

We walk on, tomorrow, one more time.

Chapter Twenty: The Crown's Crown

The Crown of Inwood Hill

In the morning we leave Tamsin's house and we walk the last quarter-mile of the walk.

The last quarter-mile is uphill. It is, in fact, the only real hill on the island, the last natural rise of land before the island ends and the river begins. The hill is wooded. The hill has, on its lower slopes, a small dense neighborhood of houses — the very last houses of the spiral, packed together at the bottom of the hill like the petals at the base of a flower — and on its upper slopes, the small remaining forest, which the people of the new city have agreed to leave as it was. The forest is the only piece of the old island that has not, in any visible way, been touched by the softening. It is the same forest that was there before. The same trees. The same path. The same small spring near the top.

We climb the hill. The light is morning-bright. The bird is on Mireille's shoulder. We do not, on the climb, say anything.

At the top of the hill, where the trees thin and the small soft summit opens out, we stop. We turn around. We look back the way we have come.

I will try to describe what we saw.

The whole island lay below us. The whole length of Manhattan. From where we stood, on the small soft summit of Inwood Hill, we could see, in a long slow southward sweep, every neighborhood we had walked through. We could see the spiral, just below us. We could see, beyond it, the long green park, with the yellow forest at its western edge a small bright stripe of fluorescent gold. We could see the buildings of the Upper East Side and Upper West Side, in their pink and yellow tints. We could see the great green park of Central, with the Pavilion at the Met a small soft crown on its lower edge. We could see, beyond the park, the long avenues of midtown, with the Sky-Garden floating, very small from this distance, between two of the taller skyscrapers. We could see the Empire State Building, slender and slate-gray, with the daisy-field at its foot a small white-and-yellow patch. We could see the Sea at Kips Bay. We could see the Bathing Field. We could see, beyond it, the long narrow shape of Roosevelt Island in the river, with its yellow tents scattered like a small fallen constellation. We could see, further south, the great Plinth at the southern tip, with the six pink Gatekeepers small as fingerprints against the harbor. We could see, beyond them, the painted islands.

We could see, in a single long view, the entire walk.

I do not know how long we stood there. It may have been five minutes. It may have been an hour. Time, on the summit of Inwood Hill, did what time has done many times on this walk: it slowed, it stopped, it became something other than the simple progression I had always taken it for. We stood. We looked. We breathed.

The petal-bird, after some long time, took off from Mireille's shoulder. The bird flew up. The bird flew high. The bird flew, in the long blue sky over the long pink and yellow island, in a slow spiral, going higher and higher, becoming smaller and smaller, until the bird was a single bright point, until the bird was a memory of a point, until the bird was gone.

Mireille did not cry. Mireille watched the bird go and Mireille smiled.

It is going home, said Mireille.

Where is its home, I asked.

Wherever the next walk is, said Mireille. The bird goes to the next walker.

I had not, until that moment, considered that there would be a next walker. I had thought of our walk as a kind of unique thing, a thing happening only this once, a thing that would be over when we reached Inwood. I see now that I was wrong. The walk is not a unique thing. The walk happens, and has happened, and will happen, in many versions, by many walkers, over the long years of the new city. The bird is for each of them in turn. We have only borrowed the bird.

Wren has been quiet for the whole climb. Wren is, on the summit, more quiet still. I look at them. They are looking out over the island. They have, on their face, a look I have not seen on them before. It is the look, I think, of a person who has finished a piece of work. Not the look of relief — the look of a deeper rest. The look of having done what one set out to do.

This is, says Wren, the end of the walk.

We know, we say. The four of us. We say it together, without planning, in a small soft chorus.

But it is not, says Wren, the end of the walking.

We say nothing. We wait.

You will go on, says Wren. All of you. The walk has ended, but the walking does not end. You will walk other parts of the city. You will walk parts of the city that have not yet softened. You will be the softeners. The garden is not finished. The garden will not, in our lifetimes, be finished. The garden will go on growing for a very long time. We are only — and Wren turns now and looks at us, with their old kind face, with the autumn light on their cheek — we are only the first wave.

Mireille reaches up and takes my hand. Tov reaches up and takes Solenne's hand. Solenne, with their other hand, takes Wren's. Wren, with their other hand, takes mine. We are a small chain of five, standing on the summit of Inwood Hill, looking out over the long soft length of the island we have walked.

I want to tell you, before this book ends, one more thing.

I want to tell you that I have, in the years since the walk, often returned to that moment on the summit. I have returned to it in my dreams. I have returned to it in my waking hours, in the long quiet moments when I sit at my desk by the window in what used to be the East Village and I look out over the small soft street below me and I think about what the new city is and what it has been and what it will become. I have returned to it especially in the moments when I have doubted that any of it really happened — when I have wondered if the walk was real, if Wren was real, if the softening of the island was a thing I imagined or a thing I shared with millions of other people. The doubt has, in those moments, been very strong. The doubt has, at certain low hours of the night, been almost the whole of what I felt.

And then I have, in those moments, reached into my pocket. I have taken out the long bone-colored seed that Ozias gave me in the gold light of the Tunnel. I have held it in my hand. The seed is, after all these years, still warm. The seed is, after all these years, still here.

I have not planted it. Ozias told me to plant it when I finished the book. The book is, now, finished. I am going to plant the seed this afternoon.

I will not tell you where I am going to plant it. The seed will know what to do.

We climbed down from Inwood Hill that afternoon. We walked back through the spiral. We took the train south, which had begun, in the years of the softening, to run again, slowly, with soft pink cars and gentle conductors who did not, in the new city, charge any fare. We were tired. We were full. We were, all five of us, ready to go home — back to the lives we had left when we began the walk, back to the work that the walk had not replaced but had only sent us back to do better.

Mireille went home to the Lower East Side, to the apartment of her abuela, where Tov had also decided to live. The two of them, ten and eleven, would live together as best friends for the next several years, with the elderly woman in the kitchen looking after them, with the seedling on the yellow roof growing slowly into what would, in time, become a small soft tree of a kind nobody had ever seen.

Tov the younger, in time, told the elder Tov of their decision. The elder, on Randall's Island, among the daisy-fields, was not angry. The elder was glad. The elder said, when Tov the younger told them, the same thing the Sky-Garden had said: you are allowed.

Solenne went back to the gallery in Chelsea, to the small soft city in the pool, to the work of cartography. They added our walk to the model. They added each of us, as small pinpricks of green, to the places where we had planted ourselves.

Wren went back to whatever Wren does between walks. I have not been entirely sure where Wren goes between walks. They reappear, every few years, to do another walk with another group of walkers. The petal-bird, I am told, finds them each time.

And I went home, and I wrote this book.

I write: twenty-one. There are twenty chapters in this book, and the twenty-first number is for the reader. For you. You are the twenty-first walker. You are the one who finishes the walk by reading about it. The walk is not complete without you. The garden is not complete without you. The new city is not complete without you. We have, in writing this book and in placing it in your hands, only built the next pavilion. You are the cylinder that has been waiting to be added to the crown.

Go now. Plant something. Walk something. Soften something. Be allowed.

The walk ends. The walking goes on. The garden grows. The bird flies up.

SurjanAt the desk by the windowIn what used to be the East VillageA long bright afternoon in the seventh year of the softening

Afterword

by Surjan

I planted the seed.

I want to tell you that, before I tell you anything else. I planted the long bone-colored seed that Ozias gave me in the gold light of the Tunnel, on the afternoon I finished the manuscript of this book, in a small soft patch of earth at the corner of the small soft street outside my window in what used to be the East Village. The earth was warm. The seed went in easily. I patted it down. I went back upstairs.

In the morning, when I looked out the window, the seed was up. Not a tendril. Not a sprout. A whole small plant, perhaps six inches tall, with three small white blossoms already open, and a faint yellow dust on the petals that I think I recognize. I do not know what kind of plant it is. I am not sure I will ever know. I am content not to know.

I want to use this afterword to say a few things that did not fit in the chapters. There were many things that did not fit. I have tried, in writing the chapters, to keep my own voice quieter than it wanted to be — to let Wren and Solenne and Mireille and Tov and the locations themselves do most of the talking. There were things, however, that only I could say. I will say them now.

The first thing is about the new city. I have written this book as though the new city were a thing that happened. As though the softening were an event with a beginning and a middle and an end. This is, I have come to understand in the years of writing, not quite right. The softening is not an event. The softening is a process. The softening is, in fact, the only process. Everything that has ever happened in any city, in any place, in any moment of any person's life, has been a kind of softening — a kind of becoming-less-hard, a kind of letting-in. Manhattan, in the years of which I have written, has done the softening visibly, dramatically, with pink towers and yellow fields and a great soft Plinth at its southern tip. But the softening was, before that, happening invisibly, slowly, in the millions of small ways that softenings happen — in the kindness of one stranger to another, in the patience of a parent with a child, in the long careful work of people who have been trying, for a very long time, to make the world a place that more people could stand to live in. The visible softening of Manhattan is only the visible expression of an invisible softening that has been happening everywhere, all the time. The visible softening is, in a way, only the catching-up.

The second thing is about us. The walkers. Wren and Solenne and Mireille and Tov and me. I have written about us in the third person, mostly — about Mireille, about Tov, with the small affectionate

distance of a narrator — and I have written about myself in the first person, with the small affectionate distance of someone trying to keep their own ego out of the way. I want to say now, openly, that all five of us love each other. We have continued to love each other, in the years since the walk. We have not lived in the same house. We have not — Solenne and Wren excepted — been romantic with each other. But we have, in the larger sense of the word, loved. We have written to each other. We have visited each other. We have, when one of us has needed any of the others, come. There was a long week some years ago when Mireille, then sixteen, had a particularly bad month, and the four of us came to the Lower East Side and stayed in the apartment of the abuela for a week with Mireille and with Tov, and we sat with Mireille, and we cooked for them, and we did not try to fix them, and at the end of the week Mireille was not fixed, but Mireille was held, which was what they needed, and the holding was what the walk had taught us to do. I want you to know that the walk taught us to hold each other. The walk was, in this sense, also a school. We were, all five of us, also students.

The third thing is about the bird. I have not, in the chapters, fully explained the petal-bird. I did not explain it because I do not fully understand it. I have, in the years since, talked to other walkers — there have been many, after us, and I have made it my business to meet them when I can — and the bird has appeared on many of their walks too. Sometimes the bird is pink. Sometimes the bird is yellow. Sometimes the bird is the color of a peach, sometimes the color of cream. The bird is, always, the same bird, in some sense I am not equipped to explain. The bird is the city's gift to the walkers. The bird is the city saying: I see you, I am with you, I will fly. When the bird flies away at the end of the walk, the bird is going to the next walker. I have come to believe this without any evidence at all. I am not embarrassed to believe it. The new city has cured me, as I have said elsewhere in this book, of many of my old embarrassments.

The fourth thing is about the writing. I want to say something about how this book was written, because some readers will want to know. The book was written, mostly, at the desk by the window in what used to be the East Village. The book was written, mostly, in the early morning, between the hour when the light first comes over the small soft roofs across the street and the hour when the kitchen behind me begins to make its kitchen-noises and I become hungry. The book was written in pencil, first, in the notebook I carried on the walk and in three other notebooks I have filled since. The book was, then, typed up. The typing was done by Solenne, who has, in addition to being a cartographer, the kindest typing-hands of anyone I know, and who insisted on typing the manuscript when I told her I would not be doing it myself. The typing took her four months. We sat together, often, while she typed — I would dictate from the notebook, she would type, she would stop me when she did not understand my

handwriting, I would explain. The book is, in this way, also a collaboration between us. I want this on the record.

The fifth thing is about you. I have addressed you, in some of the chapters, as the reader. I have called you the twenty-first walker. I have meant it. I do not know who you are. I do not know where you are. I do not know which city you are in, or whether your city has begun to soften, or whether it has not, or whether it is in the in-between place where the softening is invisible but the longing for the softening is very strong. Whichever of these you are in, I want to tell you that the softening will come. The softening, as I have said, is the only process. The softening will come to your city as it came to mine. You may not see the daisies. You may not see the pink towers. The softening may look like other things in your city than it looked like in mine. But the softening will come, and you will recognize it when it comes, and you will know — by the way your throat tightens when you walk down a street that has, in some way you cannot quite name, become softer than it was the week before — you will know that the long quiet work has reached you. You will know that you are being welcomed. You will know that you are allowed.

The sixth thing, and the last thing, is about the future. People sometimes ask me, when they find out I wrote this book, what I think the new city will be like in fifty years. In a hundred. In a thousand. I do not know. I think the new city will be more itself, in fifty years, than it is now. I think the daisies will be denser, and the towers will be pinker, and the welcoming will be more practiced. I think there will be more walkers. I think there will be more books. I think the walking will spread to other islands and other peninsulas and other long thin pieces of land in the rivers and bays of the world, and that the softening will spread with it. I think, in a thousand years, that the world will be a place that the people of my early life would not have recognized, and that the people of a thousand years from now will not be able to imagine ever was anything else. I think the people of a thousand years from now will read this book, if any copies survive, and they will think: how strange, that they had to walk it. How strange that the softening was a new thing then. How strange that it had to be invented at all.

I think the people of a thousand years from now will be right.

I am going to put down the pencil. I am going to close the notebook. I am going to walk downstairs and out into the small soft street and over to the corner where I planted the seed, and I am going to sit on the small soft curb beside the small soft plant, and I am going to look at the three white blossoms with their faint yellow dust, and I am going to thank Ozias, who is not there, and Wren, who is not there, and Solenne and Mireille and Tov, who are also not there, and the new city, which is, very much, there. The new city is there. The new city, the new world, the new long soft answer to the long hard question — it is there. It is here. We are walking it. We are it.

The walk ends. The walking goes on.

The garden grows. The bird flies up.

SurjanAt the desk by the windowIn what used to be the East VillageThe eighth year of the softening

Catalogue of the Twenty Plates

What follows is a catalogue of the twenty plates that accompany this book. The plates are not, in any conventional sense, photographs. They are not paintings either, exactly, though some of them have the quality of paintings. They are, I think, portraits — portraits of places, in the way one might paint a portrait of a person. Each plate has been made by a different hand. The hands have been many: photographers, ceramicists, painters, weavers, one architect, one child. The captions have been written by me, with the help of Solenne, who has corrected my catalogue-prose more than once. I am grateful for her corrections.

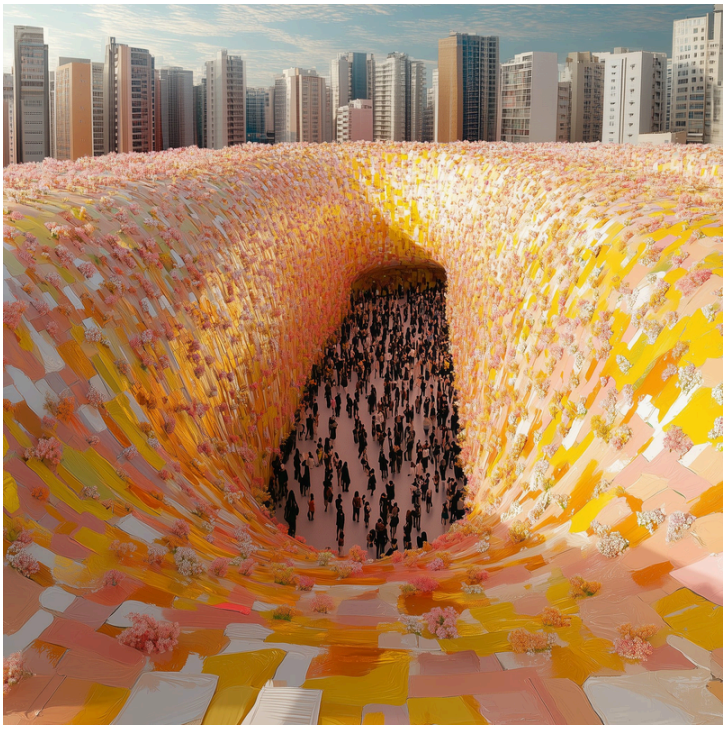
The plates are arranged in the order of the walk. To read the catalogue is to walk the island again, in miniature, from the Battery to Inwood, through the twenty places that the walk passed through. I hope that the catalogue will be useful to readers who want to revisit a particular chapter. I hope also that it will be useful to readers who, having read the book once, want to read it again at the slower pace that a catalogue allows.

A word on the format. Each entry begins with the plate's number, its title, and the location in the city where the place can be found. There follows a short description of what the plate shows. There follows a longer note on what the place is, what it does, and how to visit it if you wish. There follows, sometimes, a small final note, which is mine, and which is the kind of thing I write down when I think nobody is looking. I have left these small final notes in, although Solenne advised against them. I felt that the catalogue, like the book, should have a little of me in it.

❦

Plate I. The Gatekeepers

The Battery, southern tip of Manhattan



Photograph

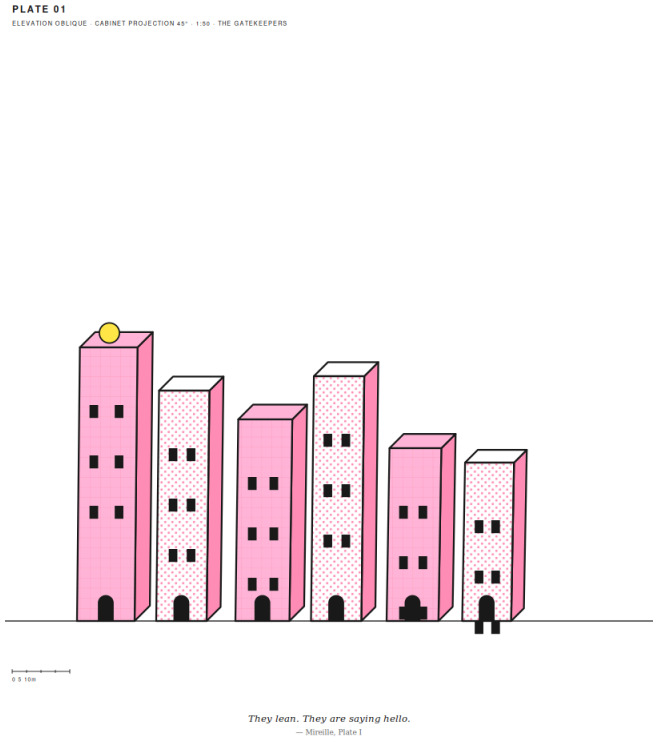


PLATE 01
ELEVATION OBLIQUE · CABINET PROJECTION 45° · 1:50 · THE GATEKEEPERS
0 5 10m
They lean. They are saying hello.
— Mireille, Plate I

Architectural Drawing (cabinet oblique)

Description. Six pink cylindrical towers of varying heights rise from a great soft pink and yellow plinth at the southernmost tip of the island. The towers are seen here from the level of the plinth itself, looking up. The largest tower stands perhaps two hundred feet tall. The smallest is perhaps half that. All six lean very slightly toward the harbor, which is visible in the lower right of the plate as a strip of cobalt water. The light is morning light, low and warm. The towers cast no shadows.

Note. The Gatekeepers are the southernmost permanent structures on the island. They are visible from boats as they come in through the harbor, and they are often the first thing arriving visitors see. They are, by long custom, greeted by name as one passes them — Old Rose, Young Rose, Long Rose, Short Rose, Bowing Rose, and the smallest of them, which has no agreed-upon name and which the children have been calling, lately, Peach.

Surjan's small note. I have walked past the Gatekeepers many times since the day I first met them with Wren. They greet me each time. I do not, by now, even need to speak the greeting aloud. They know who I am.

Plate II. The Welcomers

Battery Park, north of the Gatekeepers

Photograph

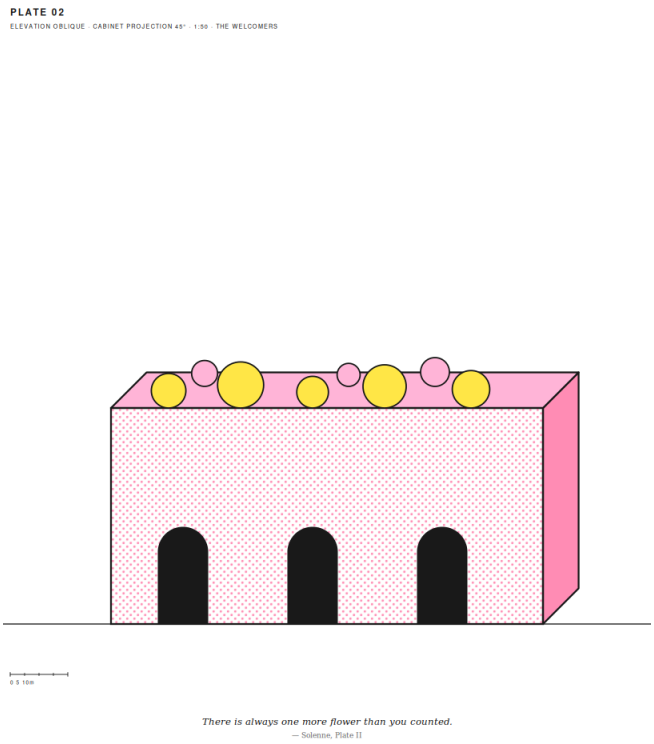


PLATE 02
ELEVATION OBLIQUE · CABINET PROJECTION 45° · 1:50 · THE WELCOMERS
0 5 10m
There is always one more flower than you counted.
— Solenne, Plate II

Architectural Drawing (cabinet oblique)

Description. A great drift of white-and-yellow daisies fills the foreground of the plate, rising to perhaps chest height. The flowers are densely packed — perhaps a hundred daisies per square yard. Behind the daisies rise the tall glass-and-steel towers of what used to be the Financial District, with their pink and yellow stains now creeping up their lower stories. The towers lean slightly toward the daisies. A child, half-visible at the right edge of the plate, sits in the daisies with their face turned up.

Note. The Spill, as the locals call it, is the largest unbroken daisy-field at the southern end of the island. It is open to visitors at all hours. There is no charge. Visitors are encouraged to remove their shoes before entering the field, though this is not required. Children, in particular, are welcomed and have been observed by long-time residents to spend whole afternoons sitting in the daisies in the manner of the child at the right edge of the plate.

Surjan's small note. Mireille is the child at the right edge of the plate. I am not, in any official sense, sure of this. But I have looked at the plate many times, and I am sure of it in the way one is sure of things one cannot prove.

Plate III. The Sister-Islands

The harbor, viewed from the western edge of Battery Park

Photograph

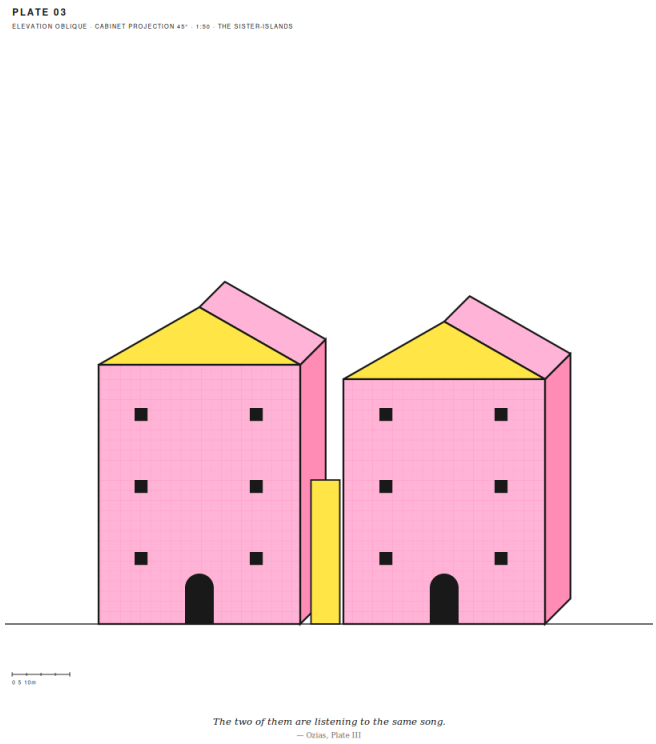


PLATE 03
ELEVATION OBLIQUE · CABINET PROJECTION 45° · 1:50 · THE SISTER-ISLANDS
0 5 10m
The two of them are listening to the same song.
— Ozias, Plate III

Architectural Drawing (cabinet oblique)

Description. A high aerial view of the islands of New York Harbor. The closest island, Governor's, occupies most of the lower half of the plate. The island is splashed with great irregular pools of pink and yellow paint, as though a giant bucket had been overturned from the sky. The pools are not uniform — they vary in saturation, in size, in the precise hue of pink or yellow, and where they overlap, a third color appears that the catalogue has, after much consultation, declined to name. Behind Governor's, smaller islands are visible in similar but distinct color-schemes. The harbor between the islands is the bluest blue, with two ferries crossing its width.

Note. The painting of the islands was either done by human hands or by the islands themselves, depending on whom you ask. The catalogue takes no position on the question. What is certain is that each island is its own color, that the colors are stable, that no maintenance is required, and that the harbor authorities have, after some initial concern, agreed to leave the islands as they are.

Surjan's small note. The third color is, I think, peach. But Wren has asked me not to call it that, and I will, in print, respect their wish.

Plate IV. The Anchor

The lower Financial District, between the Battery and Tribeca

Photograph

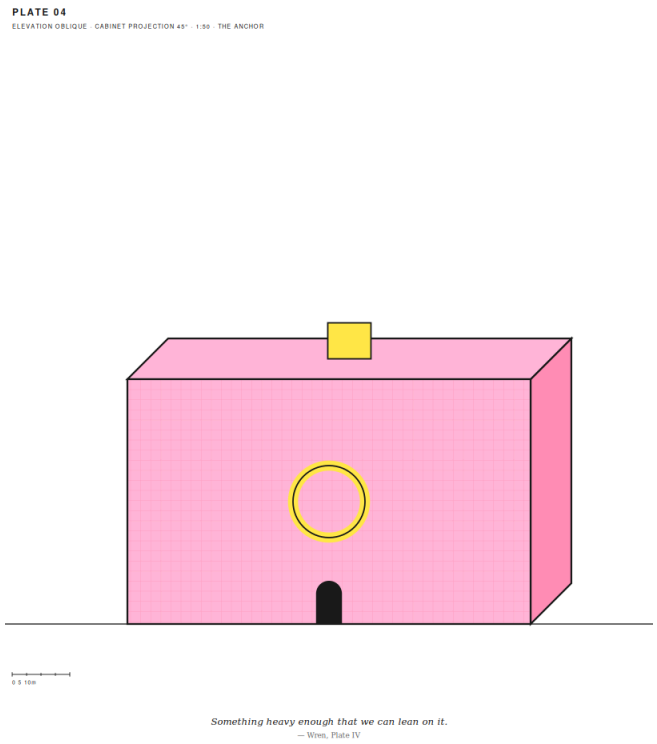


PLATE 04
ELEVATION OBLIQUE · CABINET PROJECTION 45° · 1:50 · THE ANCHOR
0 5 10m
Something heavy enough that we can lean on it.
— Wren, Plate IV

Architectural Drawing (cabinet oblique)

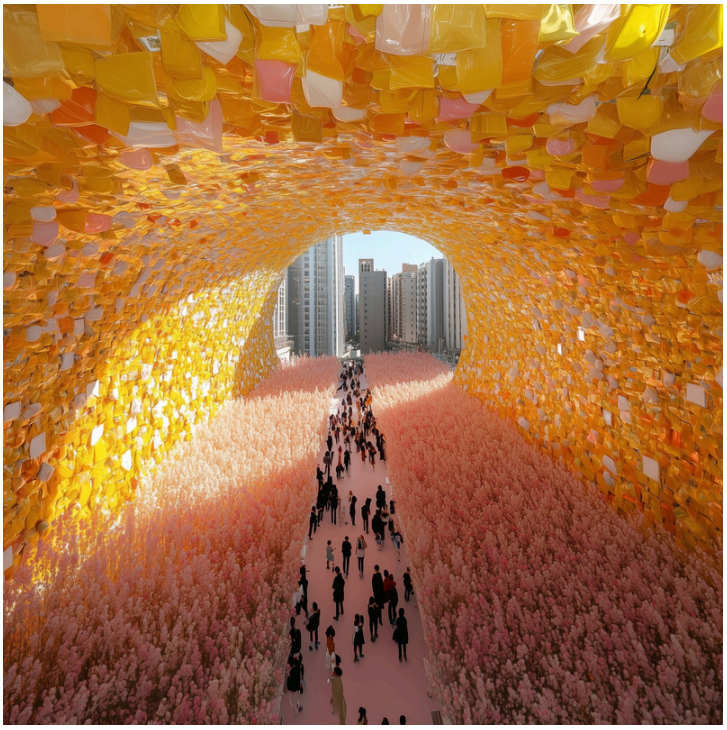
Description. An aerial view of the great pink-and-yellow plinth that lies across the lower end of Manhattan. The plinth occupies perhaps fifteen city blocks. Its surface is not flat: it rises and falls in long soft swells, with the six Gatekeepers (see Plate I) visible at the southern edge, and with smaller cylindrical outgrowths scattered across the surface. Around the edges of the plinth, the older grid of streets is just visible, in some places already overgrown with pink scrub. In the upper left, the buildings of Tribeca rise.

Note. The Plinth is the foundation of the new city's southern end. It is warm to the touch, soft underfoot, and freely accessible to all. People sleep on it. People picnic on it. People have, in recent years, taken to celebrating weddings on it, in small groups, without fuss. The Plinth has not, in any recorded instance, refused anyone access.

Surjan's small note. I slept one night on the Plinth, the second night of the walk, with Wren and Mireille on either side of me, and I will tell you that I have slept on many soft things in my life and the Plinth was softer than all of them.

Plate V. The Threshold

Tribeca, on what used to be a north-south side street



Photograph

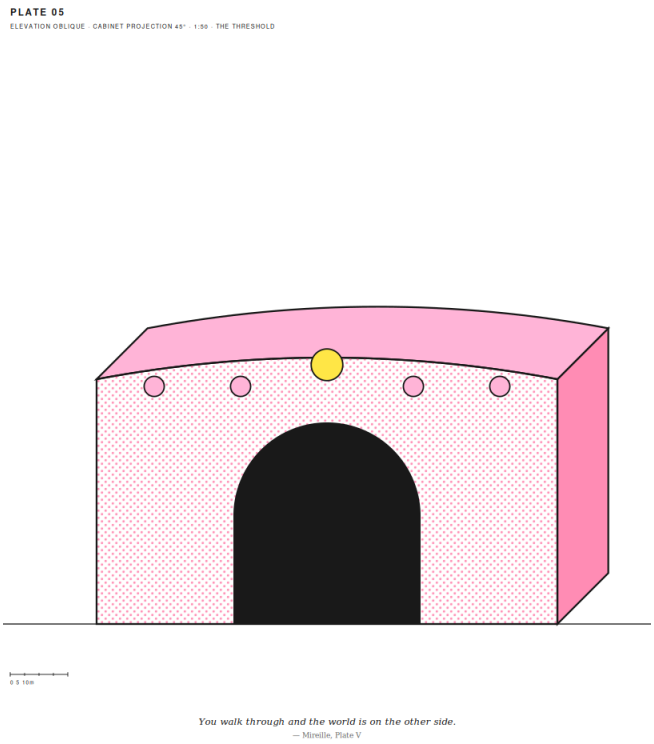


PLATE 05
ELEVATION OBLIQUE · CABINET PROJECTION 45° · 1:50 · THE THRESHOLD
0 5 10m
You walk through and the world is on the other side.
— Mireille, Plate V

Architectural Drawing (cabinet oblique)

Description. A long arched tunnel of soft yellow scales overhead, perhaps eighty feet tall at the peak, opens onto a path of waist-high pink wildflowers below. The tunnel is filled with golden light filtering through the scales. The path through the tunnel is busy: a slow river of people, all on foot, moves through it. The image is taken from a height above the tunnel's entrance, looking in. At the far end, the tunnel opens onto a bright daylight view of the buildings beyond.

Note. The Tribeca Tunnel of Blossoms was not, as far as anyone can establish, built. It is the most famous of the structures in the new city that grew of their own accord. The tunnel is approximately two blocks long. Walking through it takes, by external measure, about ten minutes; by the report of the walkers themselves, it takes considerably longer.

Surjan's small note. It was inside this tunnel that I met Ozias for the first time. I am writing this catalogue note with the seed Ozias gave me on the desk beside the page. The seed has, in the years since, lost none of its weight, which is to say none, and none of its warmth.

Plate VI. The Pavilion

SoHo, at a corner that varies

Photograph

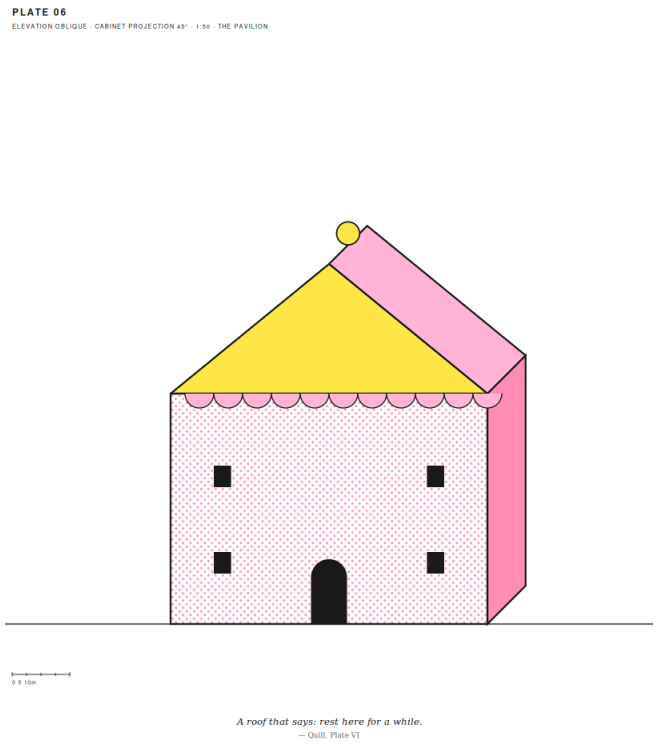


PLATE 06
ELEVATION OBLIQUE · CABINET PROJECTION 45° · 1:50 · THE PAVILION
0 5 10m
A roof that says: rest here for a while.
— Quill, Plate VI

Architectural Drawing (cabinet oblique)

Description. An interior view of a tall room. At the center, a glossy yellow column rises perhaps thirty feet to a ceiling made of pink fringe — long pink fronds hanging down like the underside of a jellyfish. Other yellow columns are visible in the background, with pink fringes drifting between them. Several small figures, mostly children, are scattered through the space, some standing, some sitting, some with their hands raised toward the columns or the ceiling. The light is soft and indirect.

Note. The SoHo Pavilion of Pink Fringe is the first of Aki's pavilions and remains, in the architect's own estimation, their favorite. The Pavilion has a habit of relocating itself, slowly, over the course of weeks. Visitors who wish to find it are encouraged to follow the sound: the Pavilion hums, audibly, when the light is right, and the hum can be heard from several blocks away.

Surjan's small note. If you sit very still in the Pavilion for an hour, and you do not try to think about anything in particular, you may begin to hum the same hum the Pavilion is humming. You will not be able to say what the song is. Nobody can.

Plate VII. The Hollow

Washington Square, on what used to be the park's central plaza

Photograph

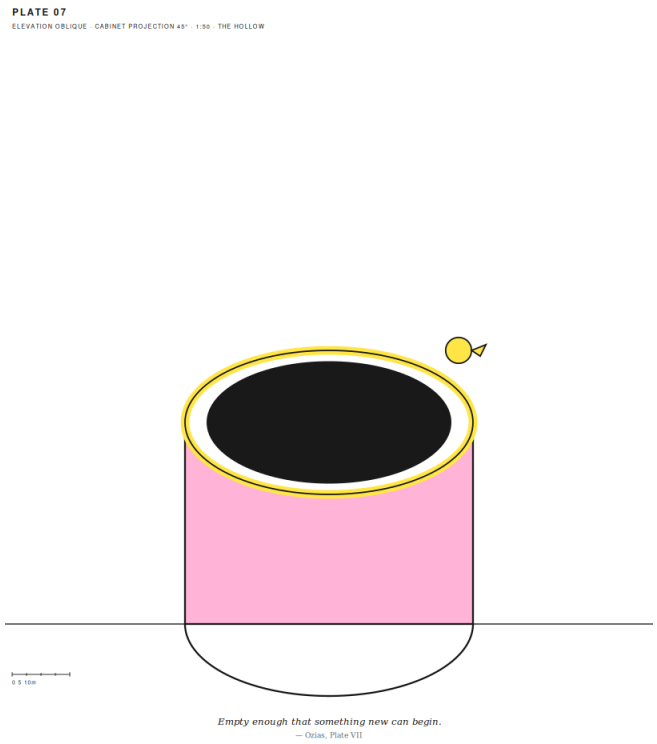


PLATE 07
ELEVATION OBLIQUE · CABINET PROJECTION 45° · 1:50 · THE HOLLOW
0 5 10m
Empty enough that something new can begin.
— Ozias, Plate VII

Architectural Drawing (cabinet oblique)

Description. An aerial view, looking nearly straight down, of an inverted cone of pink and yellow blossoms perhaps two hundred feet across at the rim and forty feet deep at the center. The walls of the cone are densely packed with flowers in shifting shades of pink, yellow, white, and cream. At the very bottom of the cone, a small clearing of pale sand is visible, with a great many small dark figures — people — standing on it, all of them looking up.

Note. The Hollow at Washington Square is open to the public from dawn until dusk. Visitors descend by a spiral path along the inside of the cone. Visitors should be advised that the Hollow has been known to produce, in some visitors, intense emotional responses, including but not limited to weeping, laughter, and the sudden composition of unsought poetry. These responses are normal and pass within a few hours.

Surjan's small note. I was given, in the Hollow, the petal-bird. I will not describe the petal-bird further, because the chapter has already described it as well as I can. But I will tell you that I have, in the years since, looked for the bird often, and the bird has come back to me in dreams, and the bird is, I think, a part of me now that did not used to be.

Plate VIII. The Quilt

The Lower East Side, viewed from above

Photograph

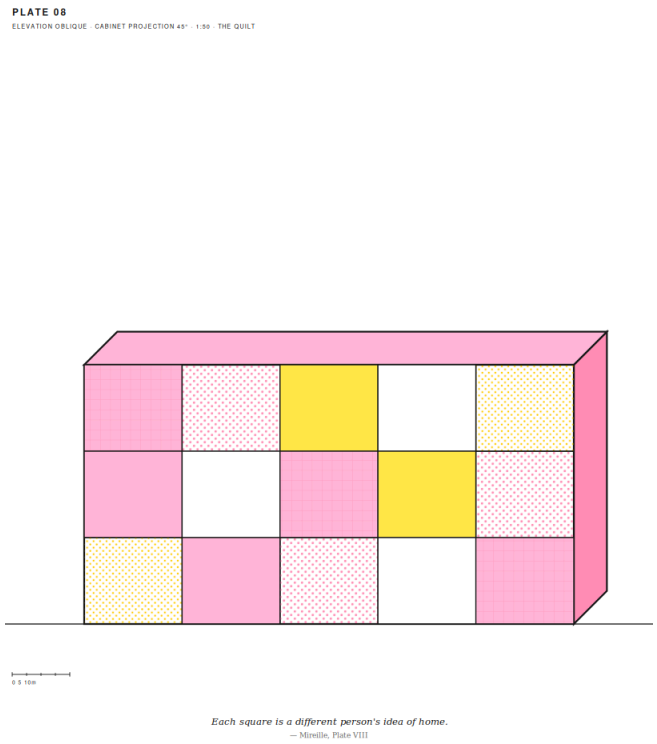


PLATE 08
ELEVATION OBLIQUE · CABINET PROJECTION 45° · 1:50 · THE QUILT
0 5 10m
Each square is a different person's idea of home.
— Mireille, Plate VIII

Architectural Drawing (cabinet oblique)

Description. A high aerial view of a dense neighborhood of low buildings, their flat roofs painted in many different bright colors. Pink, yellow, blue, green, orange, red, turquoise, magenta, and a deep purple are all visible. The roofs are not arranged in any obvious pattern: each appears to have been painted by an individual hand, with no overall coordination. Streets run between the buildings in a regular grid. The plate is taken in late afternoon light, with long shadows from the surrounding taller buildings just beginning to fall across the colored roofs.

Note. The Lower East Side Mosaic was created over a period of approximately three summers by the residents of the neighborhood, one roof at a time, without central organization. The story of how the painting began — with a single pink roof, painted by a single elderly woman — is told in Chapter Eight of this book. Visitors are welcome to view the Quilt from any of several rooftop platforms that have been opened in recent years.

Surjan's small note. Mireille planted a seed on one of the roofs of the Quilt. The seed is now a small soft tree. I have visited the tree twice. The tree does not, as far as I can tell, have a name. Mireille has refused to give it one.

Plate IX. The Mirror

Chelsea, in a converted warehouse on what used to be Twenty-Second Street

Photograph

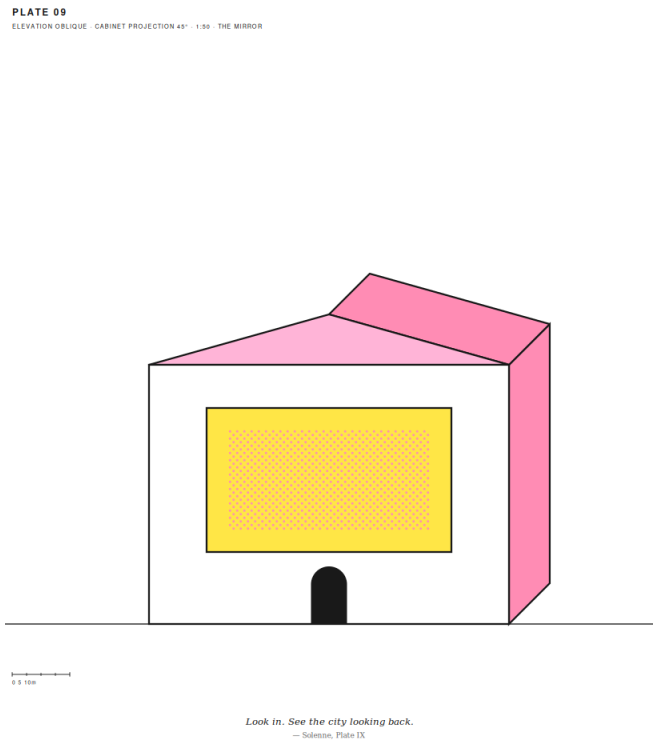


PLATE 09
ELEVATION OBLIQUE · CABINET PROJECTION 45° · 1:50 · THE MIRROR
0 5 10m
Look in. See the city looking back.
— Solenne, Plate IX

Architectural Drawing (cabinet oblique)

Description. An interior view of a long industrial space. The floor is covered with a shallow pool of dark water, in which float perhaps a thousand small ceramic forms, each one the size of a loaf of bread, each one shaped like a small soft tower, each one in a slightly different shade of pink, yellow, white, or cream. The forms together suggest, when seen from above, a map of Manhattan. Catwalks and industrial lights hang from the ceiling. Along the white walls, large abstract paintings in matching pink-and-yellow palettes are visible.

Note. The Gallery of Soft Cities is open daily. Admission is free. Solenne, the cartographer of the city, maintains the model. Visitors are asked not to touch the small towers, though they may walk along the paths between sections of the model and may, with permission, wade into the shallow pool with bare feet.

Surjan's small note. I met Solenne in this gallery for the first time. I have, since, met her in this gallery many more times. She is, as I write this, downstairs at her own desk, working on a new map. I can hear her humming. The Pavilion's song, I think.

Plate X. The Reverberation

Hudson Yards, in a warehouse on the western edge

Photograph

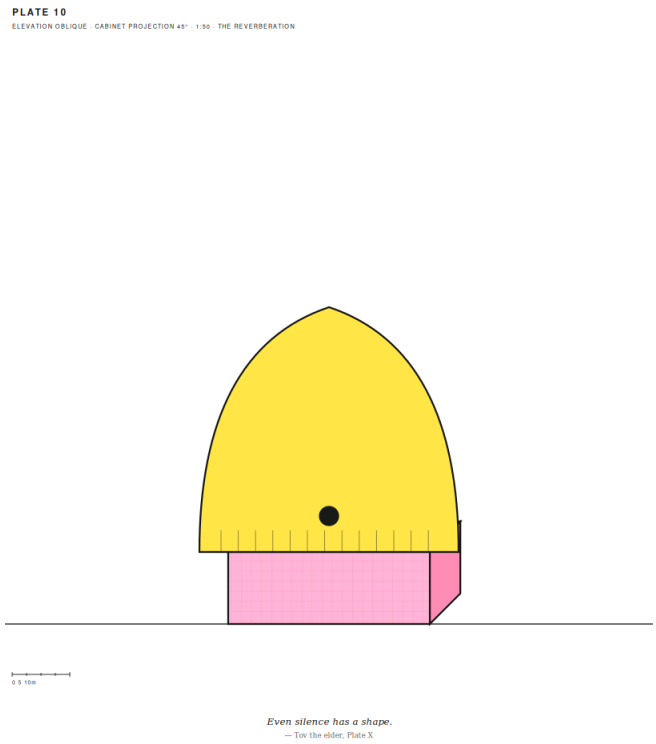


PLATE 10
ELEVATION OBLIQUE · CABINET PROJECTION 45° · 1:50 · THE REVERBERATION
0 5 10m
Even silence has a shape.
— Tov the elder, Plate X

Architectural Drawing (cabinet oblique)

Description. An interior view of a large industrial warehouse. The walls are draped with pink fringe. From the ceiling, by six thin pink cables, hangs a great glossy yellow cylinder, open at the top and open at the bottom, perhaps forty feet tall and thirty feet across. The cylinder is the Bell. The plate is taken from beneath the Bell, looking up into its interior. The yellow surface reflects, in long distorted streaks, the pink fringe of the walls and the small dim shapes of figures below.

Note. The Yellow Bell at Hudson Yards rings continuously, though the sound is below the threshold of conscious hearing for most visitors. Persons standing directly beneath the Bell may experience the sound bodily rather than aurally. Visits should be limited to no more than one hour at a stretch, with several hours' rest between visits, until the visitor has determined their own capacity.

Surjan's small note. The Bell tuned me. I cannot put it more clearly than that. I have, since I was tuned, been more in tune.

Plate XI. The Beginning of Daisies

Bryant Park, raised plateau over the old library

Photograph

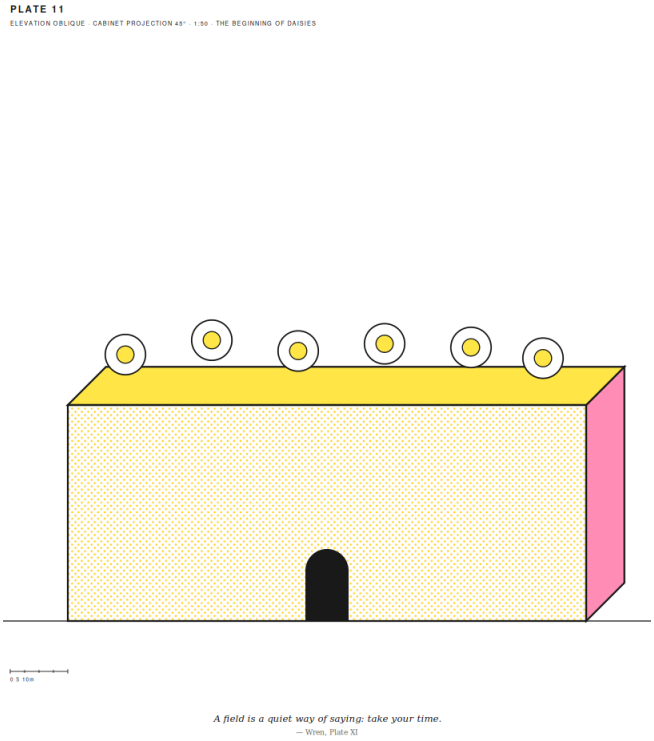


PLATE 11
ELEVATION OBLIQUE · CABINET PROJECTION 45° · 1:50 · THE BEGINNING OF DAISIES
0 5 10m
A field is a quiet way of saying: take your time.
— Wren, Plate XI

Architectural Drawing (cabinet oblique)

Description. A ground-level view across a great low plateau of white-and-yellow daisies, with the skyscrapers of midtown rising in the background. The Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building, and several other towers are visible. In the immediate foreground, the daisies are in such density that no ground is visible between them. A short wooden retaining wall separates the daisy plateau from the stone walkway at the right edge of the plate, where two figures in dark clothing stand looking out.

Note. The Bryant Park Daisy-Field is the oldest of the great daisy-fields on the island. The flowers are reported to have come up first through the cracks of the marble floor of the old library reading room, in the third spring of the softening. The librarians watered them rather than removing them, and the daisies have spread, in the years since, across the entire park and into many of the surrounding blocks.

Surjan's small note. I cried in this field. I do not know if I have admitted that elsewhere. I cried for a long time. I have been a different person ever since.

Plate XII. The Sky-Garden

Midtown, hovering between skyscrapers

Photograph

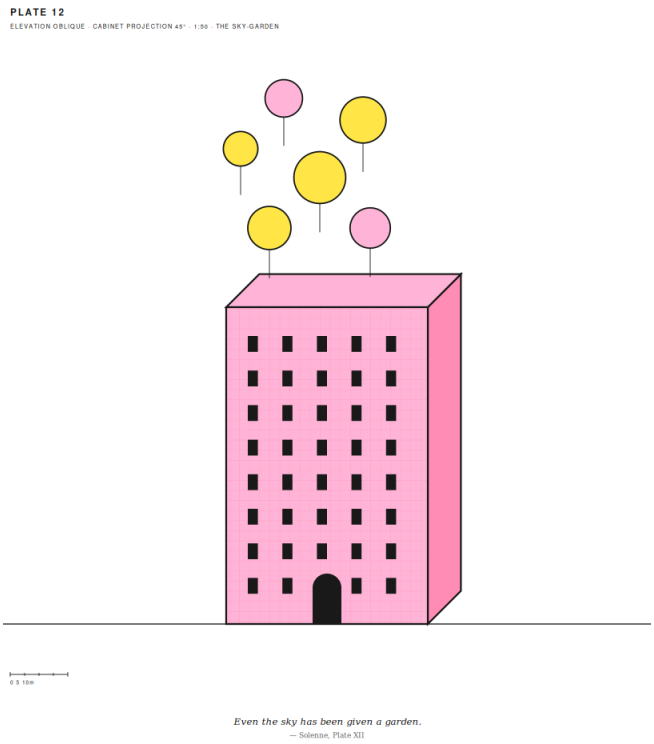


PLATE 12
ELEVATION OBLIQUE · CABINET PROJECTION 45° · 1:50 · THE SKY-GARDEN
0 5 10m
Even the sky has been given a garden.
— Solenne, Plate XII

Architectural Drawing (cabinet oblique)

Description. A view from street level looking up: a great cloud of pink, yellow, white, and cream balloons, several hundred in number, packed together in the shape of a floating cloud perhaps two hundred feet across, suspended between the tall buildings of midtown. Below the cloud, on the avenue, a dense crowd of small figures is just visible, all of them looking up. The light comes from behind the cloud, illuminating it from above; long pink shadows fall on the street below.

Note. The Midtown Balloon-Sky has no fixed location. It drifts slowly through the streets of midtown, generally remaining within a few blocks of the corner where it was last seen. Once a day, at an unpredictable time, the Sky-Garden releases a single balloon, which drifts down to a chosen person below. The balloon carries a single sentence. The sentences are not, in the catalogue's view, predictable.

Surjan's small note. Tov was chosen by the Sky-Garden. I am, in the catalogue, expected to be neutral, but I want to note here that Tov was the right person to be chosen, on the day they were chosen, with the sentence that they received.

Plate XIII. The Field of the Empire

Murray Hill, at the foot of the Empire State Building

Photograph

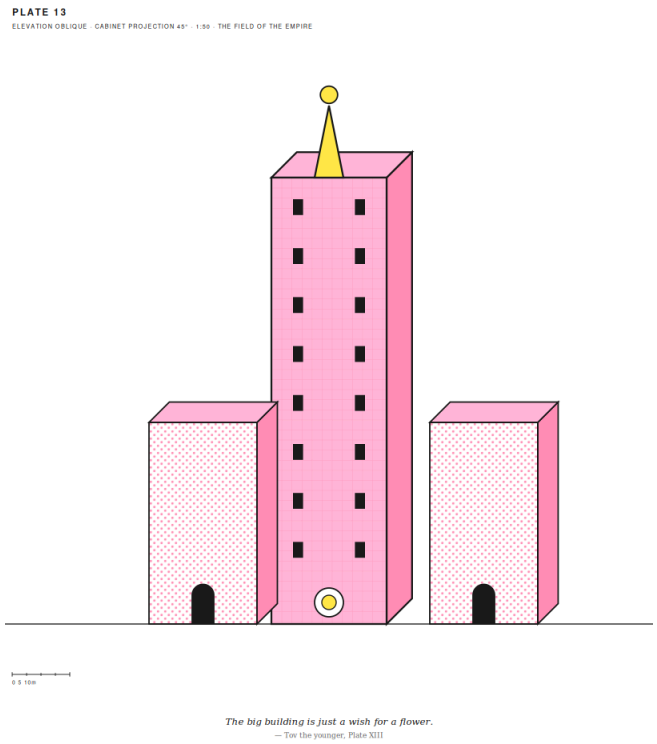


PLATE 13
ELEVATION OBLIQUE · CABINET PROJECTION 45° · 1:50 · THE FIELD OF THE EMPIRE
0 5 10m
The big building is just a wish for a flower.
— Tov the younger, Plate XIII

Architectural Drawing (cabinet oblique)

Description. A close-up view of dense daisies in the foreground, with the Empire State Building and several other midtown towers rising directly out of the daisy-field in the background. The Chrysler Building's distinctive stepped crown is visible at the right edge. The daisies are large — each blossom perhaps the size of a fist — with white petals and yellow centers. A soft breeze, frozen in the plate, has tilted some of the flowers slightly to the west. The sky is clear and pale blue.

Note. The Field of the Empire is the largest single contiguous daisy-field on the island. It extends from approximately Thirty-Fourth Street north to Fortieth, and from Madison Avenue east to Third. The field is open at all hours. There are no paths through the field; visitors are encouraged to walk freely.

Surjan's small note. I want to say one thing here that I did not say in the chapter. The Field of the Empire is the place I would, if asked, choose to be buried. I have told Solenne this. She has agreed to see to it. I tell you in case she forgets.

Plate XIV. The Sea

Kips Bay, between the East River and the Empire State Building

Photograph

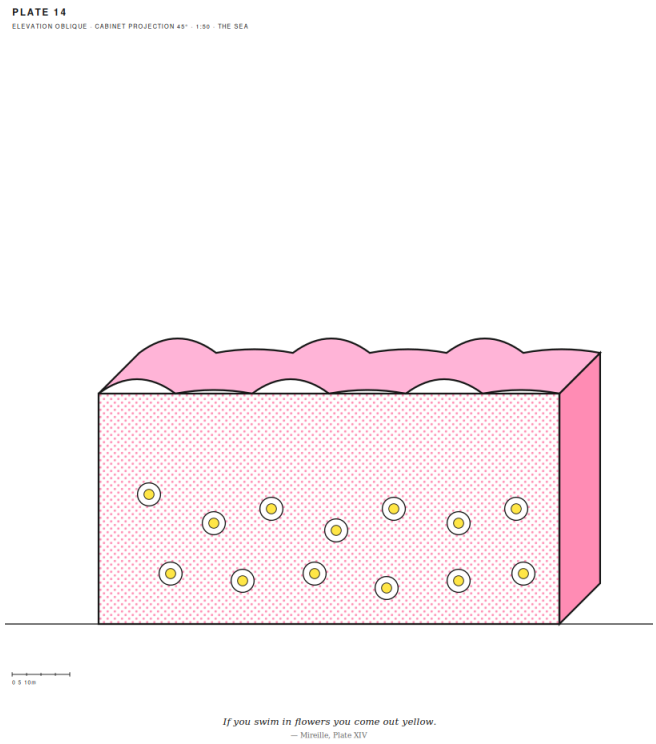


PLATE 14
ELEVATION OBLIQUE · CABINET PROJECTION 45° · 1:50 · THE SEA
0 5 10m
If you swim in flowers you come out yellow.
— Mireille, Plate XIV

Architectural Drawing (cabinet oblique)

Description. A ground-level view of an immense daisy-field extending from the foreground to the horizon, where the Empire State Building rises in the distance. The daisies in the immediate foreground are very large — each blossom perhaps eight inches across — with white petals and bright yellow centers. The field extends in all directions; no ground is visible between the flowers. The sky is blue, with high white clouds. A few small figures of distant people are just visible at the horizon line.

Note. The Daisy Sea at Kips Bay is, by general agreement, the densest daisy-field on the island. The flowers are estimated, by one botanist, at three million individuals. Visitors wishing to swim in the Sea — that is, to wade through it with arms outstretched in the local manner — are welcome to do so at any time of day or night.

Surjan's small note. I swam. I have written about it in Chapter Fourteen. I cannot improve on the writing of that chapter, so I will not try.

Plate XV. The Baptism

On the east bank of the East River, north of the Sea

Photograph

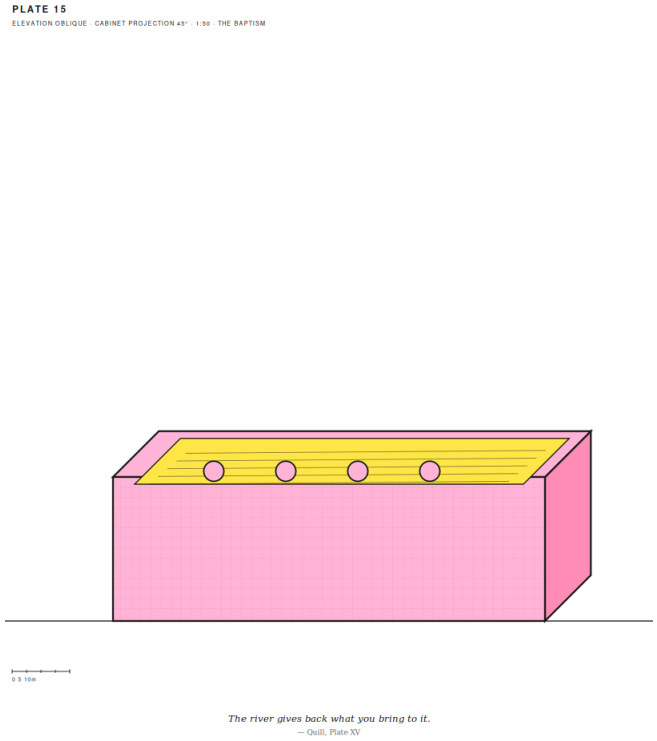


PLATE 15
ELEVATION OBLIQUE · CABINET PROJECTION 45° · 1:50 · THE BAPTISM
0 5 10m
The river gives back what you bring to it.
— Quill, Plate XV

Architectural Drawing (cabinet oblique)

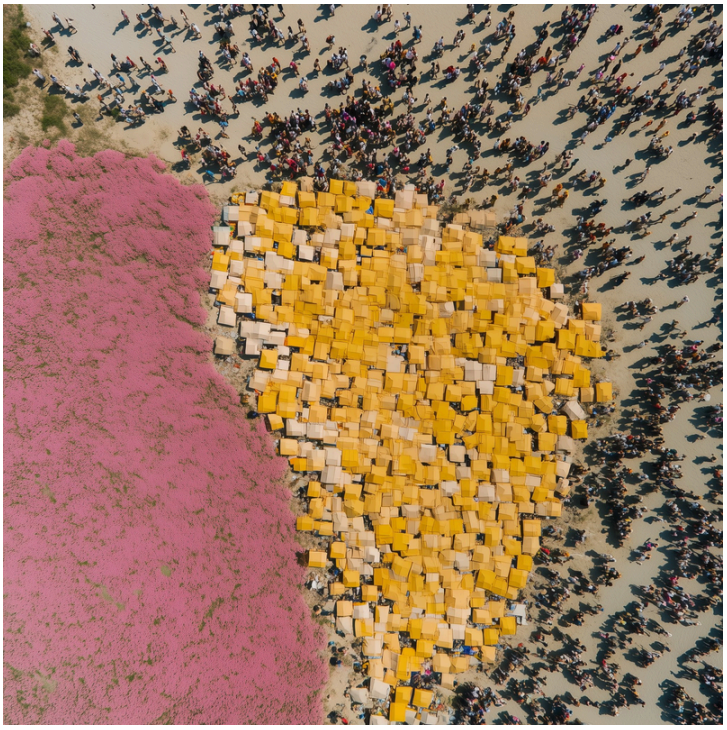
Description. A ground-level view of a great low field of yellow pollen-fluff and small white star-flowers, extending from the foreground to the middle distance, where a tall apartment tower of the East Village rises against a partly cloudy sky. A small figure of a child lies face-up in the flowers, with their arms outstretched. Several other small figures, more distantly, stand at the edges of the field, waiting. The light is the gold light of late afternoon.

Note. The Bathing Field at the East River is open to all. Visitors enter alone, lie down in the flowers, and remain for as long as they wish — though most stay for about an hour. The Field has been reported to produce, in those who lie in it, the experience of being in the presence of a person or persons whom they need to feel present. The catalogue makes no claim about the mechanism of this experience and recommends that readers come and try it themselves.

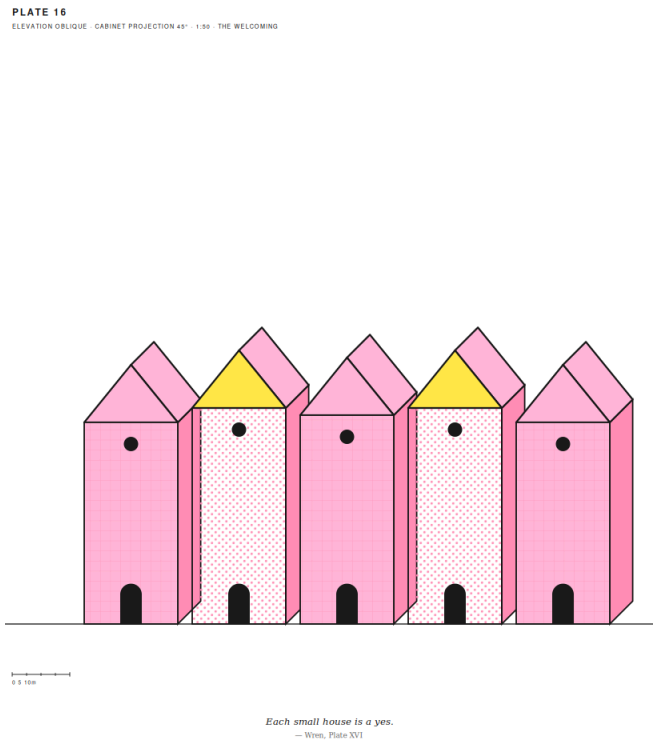
Surjan's small note. I felt my mother in this field. I felt other things too. I will not describe them. They are mine.

Plate XVI. The Welcoming

Roosevelt Island, southern half



Photograph



Architectural Drawing (cabinet oblique)

Description. An aerial view of a long narrow island in a wide river. The southern half of the island is covered with hundreds of yellow domed tents arranged in long curving rows, with borders of pink scrub between them. Pink and white blossoming trees are scattered throughout the tent-village. The river around the island is bright blue. A small footbridge in pink is visible at the upper edge of the plate, leading off to the Manhattan side.

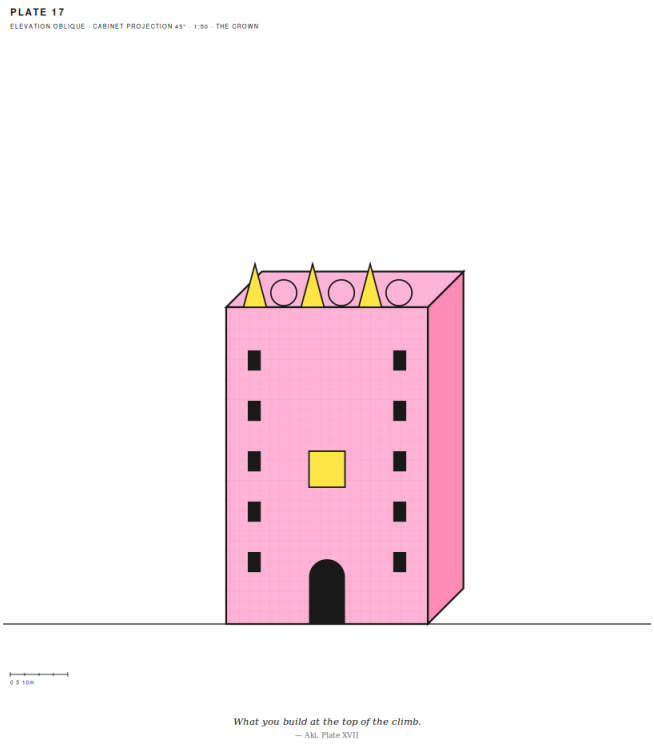
Note. The tent-village on Roosevelt Island is the primary point of arrival for new residents of the new city. New arrivals are met at the footbridge, escorted to a tent, and welcomed into the long curving rows. The tents are made of a soft yellow fabric that grows with its occupants. There is no charge for residence. There is no maximum length of stay.

Surjan's small note. Faiza lives here. They have written me three letters since the walk. I have written them four. We are even, in a sense; we are also, in a larger sense, in long uneven correspondence with each other and with the new city we both, now, call home.

Plate XVII. The Crown

Central Park, at the southern end, near the Met

Photograph



Architectural Drawing (cabinet oblique)

Description. An exterior view, in afternoon light, of a circular building approximately two hundred feet in diameter. The lower portion of the building is a low ring of clear glass. Above the glass rises a curving yellow band perhaps thirty feet tall. Above the yellow band, on top of the building, is a great soft crown of tall cylinders — perhaps a hundred visible from this angle, in shades of pink, white, yellow, cream, peach, and pale orange. The cylinders are packed closely together, varying slightly in height. Trees of the park are visible in the foreground.

Note. The Park Pavilion at the Met was designed by Aki. The crown of cylinders was made, one cylinder per household, by the residents of the surrounding neighborhood. There are, in total, eight hundred and forty-seven cylinders. A catalogue of which cylinder belongs to which household is available on request at the Pavilion's entrance.

Surjan's small note. I am, when I write this, looking forward to the Pavilion that Mireille and Aki will build at Delancey and Allen. I have been promised a bench in it. I will sit, when it is finished, in the bench, and I will look up at Mireille's small yellow cylinder, and I will not, then or ever, be embarrassed to cry.

Plate XVIII. The Forest

The west side of the upper park, along the Hudson

Photograph

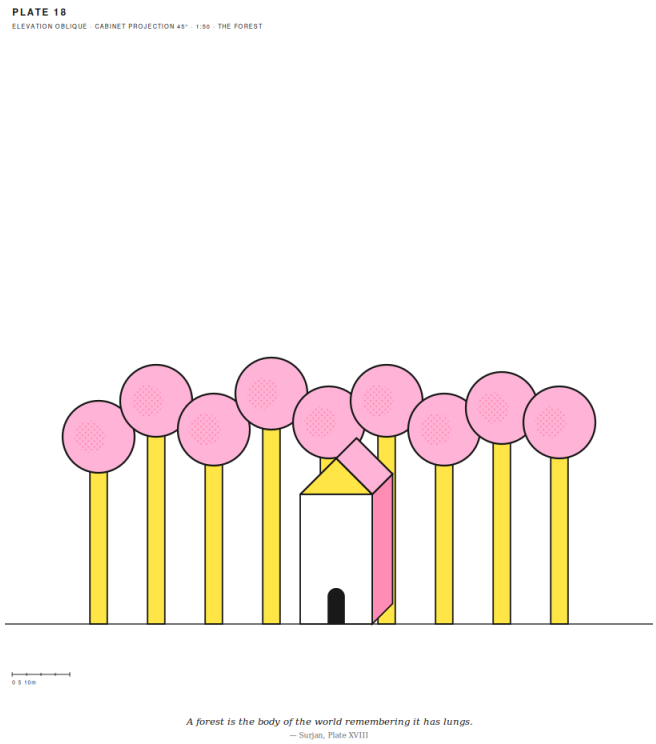


PLATE 18
ELEVATION OBLIQUE · CABINET PROJECTION 45° · 1:50 · THE FOREST
0 5 10m
A forest is the body of the world remembering it has lungs.
— Surjan, Plate XVIII

Architectural Drawing (cabinet oblique)

Description. A view from a low path through a slender forest. The trees are perhaps thirty feet tall, with smooth pale trunks and small serrated leaves of a bright, fluorescent, lemon-yellow color. The light filtering through the canopy is intensely golden, falling in long warm bars across the pink sand of the path. A wooden bench at the right edge of the plate is just visible, with a small notebook open on it. No figures are present in the plate; the path stretches into the distance.

Note. The Yellow Forest at the Hudson is the only known forest of its kind. The trees, which have not yet been given a Latin name, retain their yellow color throughout the year. The forest is open to visitors at all hours. Benches are placed at intervals along the path. Visitors are encouraged to bring a notebook, though this is not required.

Surjan's small note. I met Iona here. I have her small hand-stitched book on my desk as I write. The cover is pink. The stripe down the spine is yellow. I open the book sometimes, when I am stuck, and read a paragraph at random, and then I am, for the next hour, unstuck.

Plate XIX. The Spiral

Inwood, northern Manhattan

Photograph

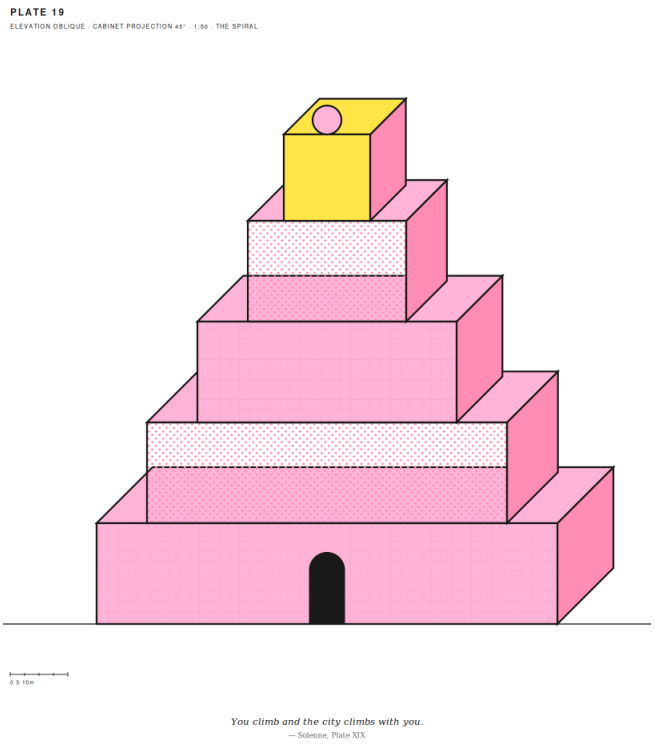


PLATE 19
ELEVATION OBLIQUE · CABINET PROJECTION 45° · 1:50 · THE SPIRAL
0 5 10m
You climb and the city climbs with you.
— Solente, Plate XIX

Architectural Drawing (cabinet oblique)

Description. A high aerial view of a densely packed neighborhood of small, low, brightly colored houses arranged in long curving rows around a central wooded park. The curving rows form, when seen from this height, a clear spiral pattern, with the rows winding inward toward the small open plaza at the center of the spiral. The houses are every color: pink, yellow, green, coral, red, blue, orange, and many shades between. The forested park at the spiral's center is visible at the upper edge of the plate, with the river beyond.

Note. The Inwood Spiral was formed over the course of several years as the streets of the old grid were allowed to soften and rearrange. The houses of the spiral are privately owned but freely visitable from the outside; visitors are welcomed in the small open plaza at the center, where a low stone wall bears the inscription YOU HAVE ARRIVED.

Surjan's small note. I have arrived. I am still, I think, arriving. The two are not in contradiction.

Plate XX. The Crown's Crown

Inwood Hill, the northernmost point of Manhattan

Photograph

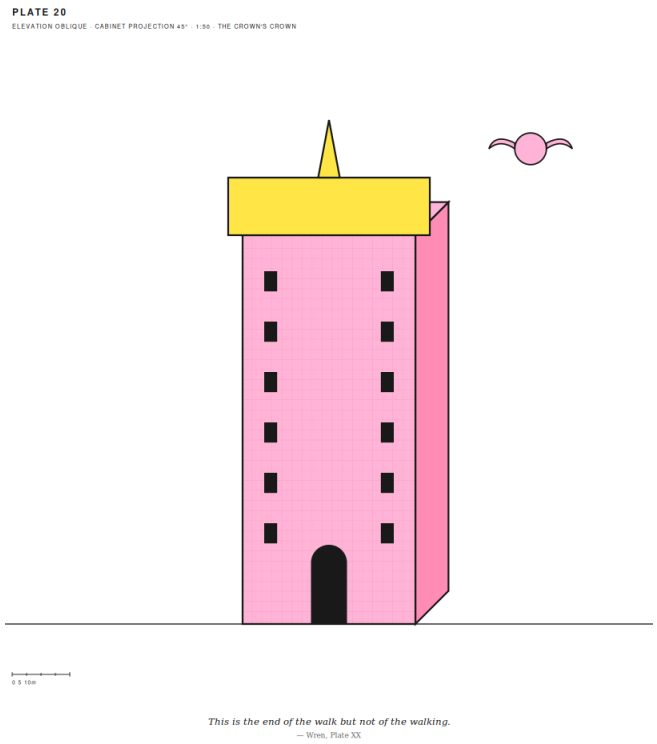


PLATE 20
ELEVATION OBLIQUE · CABINET PROJECTION 45° · 1:50 · THE CROWN'S CROWN
0 5 10m
This is the end of the walk but not of the walking.
— Wren, Plate XX

Architectural Drawing (cabinet oblique)

Description. A high aerial view of the northern tip of the island, with the small wooded summit of Inwood Hill in the center, and the dense colorful spiral of Inwood neighborhood spreading out below it. To the south, the long body of Manhattan is just visible, fading into the haze, with the great fields of daisies and pink scrub and yellow forest discernible as patches of color along its length. To the north and west, the river is visible. A single small bright point hangs in the upper portion of the plate, against the blue sky, which the catalogue has identified, after some debate, as the petal-bird in flight.

Note. The summit of Inwood Hill is the highest natural elevation on Manhattan. From the summit, the entire length of the island is visible on clear days. The summit is reached by a short wooded path from the upper edge of the spiral; the climb takes approximately fifteen minutes. There are no facilities at the summit. There is no need for them.

Surjan's small note. We watched the bird fly up from this summit. The bird is, now, with the next walker. I do not know who the next walker is. I am content not to know. The next walker is reading this catalogue, perhaps, even now. The next walker is you.

Map and Architectural Drawings

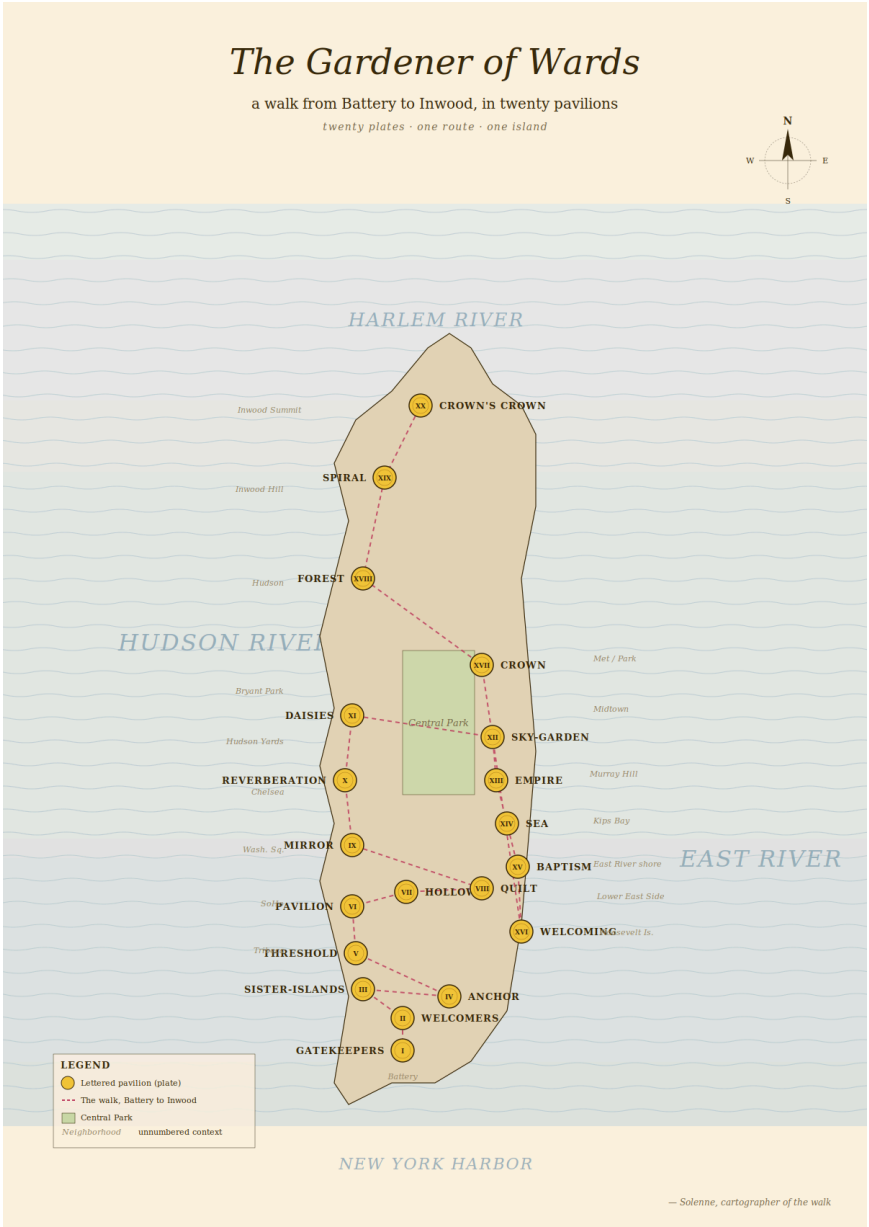
The book is accompanied, in this final section, by a map of the walk and by twenty-one architectural drawings: one for each of the twenty stations on the walk, plus a master drawing showing all twenty stations as a single procession along the island. The drawings have all been rendered in cabinet oblique projection — an architect's convention in which the front face of each building is shown true and any depth retreating into the page is drawn at half scale along a forty-five degree axis. This projection has the useful property that vertical and horizontal measurements along the front face remain accurate, so that one can read heights and widths directly off the page. It has the equally useful property that the buildings look, somehow, like themselves: neither flattened by an overly geometric plan view nor distorted by the perspective of a true photograph. The drawings here have been pared back to their essentials — line, color, projection, and a single quiet caption. Each plate carries only what is necessary: the title block at the upper left, the scale bar at the lower left, the building itself, and a small quoted line from one of the walkers. The reader is invited to look slowly, and to use the drawings as the architect intended — not as a substitute for being there, but as a way of beginning to remember what it might be like to be there.

The Map of the Walk

The map shows the island of Manhattan as a long narrow shape, oriented vertically on the page, with north at the top and south at the bottom. The island is rendered in a soft pink wash, with the rivers on either side and the harbor at the foot in a deep cobalt blue. The twenty locations of the walk are marked along the length of the island as numbered yellow circles, each with a small line connecting it to its name in the margin. The path of the walk, drawn as a thin yellow line, runs from the Battery at the bottom to Inwood at the top, winding from west to east as it crosses the island in accordance with the route Wren chose.

The locations, in order, are: (1) the Gatekeepers at the Battery, (2) the Welcomers at Battery Park, (3) the Sister-Islands in the harbor (shown as smaller painted shapes off the southern tip), (4) the Anchor in the lower Financial District, (5) the Threshold in Tribeca, (6) the Pavilion in SoHo, (7) the Hollow at Washington Square, (8) the Quilt in the Lower East Side, (9) the Mirror in Chelsea, (10) the Reverberation at Hudson Yards, (11) the Beginning of Daisies at Bryant Park, (12) the Sky-Garden in midtown, (13) the Field of the Empire at Murray Hill, (14) the Sea at Kips Bay, (15) the Baptism on the East River bank, (16) the Welcoming on Roosevelt Island (shown as a separate elongated shape in the river), (17) the Crown at the Met in Central Park, (18) the Forest on the Hudson side of the upper park, (19) the Spiral at Inwood, and (20) the Crown's Crown at Inwood Hill.

A small petal-bird, drawn in pink and yellow, is shown in flight above the northern tip of the island, having just left location twenty. A small peach pit is shown at the southern tip, at location two, marking the place where Wren planted it on the first afternoon of the walk. A scale-bar in the lower right indicates that one inch on the map is approximately one mile on the ground. The map was drawn by Solenne, in pencil and pink wash and yellow wash, in the fifth year of the softening, and has been gently revised once in each subsequent year to account for changes in the landscape.



Map: The Gardener of Wards, twenty plates from Battery to Inwood

Plate I — The Gatekeepers

The first drawing shows the six pink towers at the Battery in cabinet oblique elevation. The towers are presented as a small parade, each one slightly different in height and pattern — some with a halftone of pink dots on white, some with a heavier pink-on-pink grid. A small yellow ball rests on the tallest tower like a finial that has lost its building. The drawing makes no attempt to indicate the harbor or the Plinth they stand upon; the towers stand simply on the ground line, leaning, as if waiting.

Plate II — The Welcomers

The second drawing shows a low wide pavilion in cabinet oblique, its front face speckled with the regular halftone of pink dots that, throughout the book, indicates the soft flowering surfaces. Three black arched openings break the front face — these are the welcomers themselves, the small archways through which the visitor enters Battery Park. Along the roof line a small procession of yellow and pink spheres has gathered, like blossoms that have rolled up to look down.

Plate III — The Sister-Islands

The third drawing shows two near-identical pavilions side by side in cabinet oblique — twin gabled forms, each with a pink-grid front face, a yellow gable, and a small black arched door. Between them, a single tall yellow rectangle stands like a beacon or a candle. The drawing reads as a portrait: the two sisters seen together, with the small bright something they hold between them.

Plate IV — The Anchor

The fourth drawing shows a single heavy form — the Plinth as a low wide pink-grid block in cabinet oblique. On its front face a yellow ring is drawn, large and central, the way one paints the bullseye of a target. A small yellow square sits on the top surface, almost decoratively. At the base, a small black arched opening: the door into the heavy soft thing the city has decided to keep.

Plate V — The Threshold

The fifth drawing shows a long pink tunnel form in cabinet oblique — a wide horizontal pavilion with an arched roof, its front face speckled with pink dots and its top surface curving over. A great black arched opening dominates the front face: the tunnel through which one walks to come out the other side. Above the arch, a yellow disc, and along the roof small pink discs scattered as if the petals had only just settled there.

Plate VI — The Pavilion

The sixth drawing shows a small pitched-roof pavilion in cabinet oblique, with a steep yellow gable and a pink half-slope behind it. The front face is the regular pink dot halftone; along the eave hangs a row of small pink semicircular fringe-pieces, fluttering. A single yellow ball sits at the peak. Two small black square windows on each side and a small arched door below. It is a building one could draw with a child.

Plate VII — The Hollow

The seventh drawing shows the Hollow rendered as a single squat pink cylinder in cabinet oblique. The top of the cylinder is open — a black ellipse showing the void within — and around its rim runs a thick yellow ring like a halo. To the right, a small yellow bird-form (a circle with a triangular tail) hovers near the lip of the hollow, suggesting the moment when the petal-bird first emerged from the box at the bottom of the bowl.

Plate VIII — The Quilt

The eighth drawing shows the Lower East Side Mosaic rendered as a long horizontal pavilion in cabinet oblique whose front face is divided into a five-by-three grid of small squares. Each square holds a different fill — yellow, pink, white, halftone, grid pattern — like a quilt seen from very close. The drawing makes no attempt to indicate the streets or the buildings around it; the quilt is the building, and the building is the quilt.

Plate IX — The Mirror

The ninth drawing shows a small white pavilion in cabinet oblique with a low pink-pitched roof and, dominating its front face, a single large bright-yellow rectangle: the mirror itself. Within the yellow rectangle a pattern of pink dots indicates the reflection one might see when looking in — the city softened, given back. A small black arched door at the base of the pavilion offers entry.

Plate X — The Reverberation

The tenth drawing shows a single small pink-grid base in cabinet oblique, surmounted by a tall yellow bell-form: a dome rising from the base like an upturned cup. Inside the bell, a small black disc indicates the clapper, though throughout the book the bell is described as having no clapper at all. The bell's surface is incised with fine vertical lines suggesting its hollow ring. The whole form is taller than it is wide.

Plate XI — The Beginning of Daisies

The eleventh drawing shows a long low yellow pavilion in cabinet oblique, its top surface bright solid yellow, its front face a halftone of yellow dots. Along the roof, six daisies — small white circles with yellow centers — sit in a quiet row, each at a slightly different height, like flowers that have grown of their own accord. A small black arched door at the base offers entry into the field.

Plate XII — The Sky-Garden

The twelfth drawing shows a tall thin pink-grid tower in cabinet oblique, its front face perforated by a dense regular grid of small black square windows. From the roof rise six small spheres — four yellow, two pink — each on a thin black string, drifting upward like balloons gathered around the building's head. The drawing captures the moment when the city's sky has gathered into shape and is about to lift one walker with it.

Plate XIII — The Field of the Empire

The thirteenth drawing shows a central tall pink-grid tower in cabinet oblique, capped with a small yellow spire and a yellow ball above it. Two smaller pink-dot pavilions stand on either side, each with their own small arched doors, the way three sisters might stand for a portrait. At the foot of the central tower, a single small daisy is drawn — a reminder that even the Empire is built atop a flower.

Plate XIV — The Sea

The fourteenth drawing shows a wide low pavilion in cabinet oblique whose roof is a series of small waves — pink crests rising and falling along the top like a sea. The front face is the regular halftone of pink dots. In front of the pavilion, a sea of daisies — thirteen small white-and-yellow flowers drawn at various heights — fills the foreground, indicating that the daisies have spilled out beyond the building itself.

Plate XV — The Baptism

The fifteenth drawing shows the Bathing Field as a wide low pink-grid rim in cabinet oblique, with a bright yellow rectangle for the water set into its top surface. Faint diagonal lines across the yellow water indicate ripples. Four small pink circles are drawn along the front edge: the heads of bathers in the water. The drawing makes the pool a kind of soft yellow window cut into the river's edge.

Plate XVI — The Welcoming

The sixteenth drawing shows five small pitched-roof shelters in a row in cabinet oblique. Each is the size of a small tent, alternating between yellow and pink gables, all with the same simple black arched door and a single small round window above. The drawing is the quietest in the book: five small houses, each one a yes, sitting on the shore of Roosevelt Island.

Plate XVII — The Crown

The seventeenth drawing shows a single grand pink-grid tower in cabinet oblique. On its head sits an alternating procession of small yellow triangles and small pink balls — the Crown — like a row of candles and ornaments. Inside the tower's front face, a single yellow square is placed at the center: the small bright something the Crown protects. A double row of small black square windows climbs the building.

Plate XVIII — The Forest

The eighteenth drawing shows nine yellow trees of varying heights in cabinet oblique — each with a thin yellow trunk and a large pink spherical crown. The pink crowns are speckled with a dense halftone of small pink dots. In the center of the forest stands a single small white-walled hut with a yellow gabled roof and a small black arched door: the hut at the center of the forest, easy to miss.

Plate XIX — The Spiral

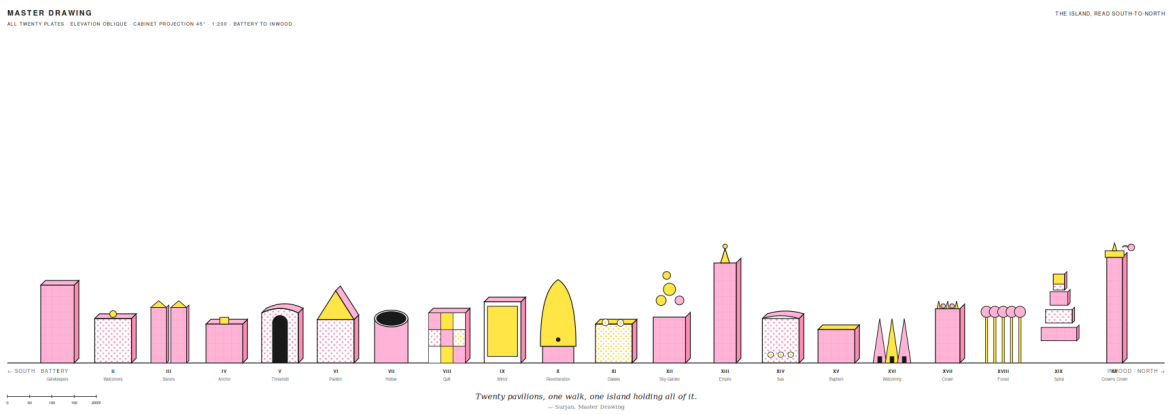
The nineteenth drawing shows a five-level stepped pyramid in cabinet oblique — each level smaller than the one below, each with its own pink-grid or pink-dot front face, all sharing the same depth retreating along the 45° axis. The topmost cube is solid yellow with a pink ball above it: the small bright crown of the climb. At the base, a single black arched door invites entry to the spiral that climbs through the levels.

Plate XX — The Crown's Crown

The twentieth and final drawing shows a single tall pink-grid tower in cabinet oblique, surmounted by a wide yellow band (the crown) and a small yellow spire above. To the right of the tower, a small pink bird is drawn in flight — wings extended, body rising — heading away from the tower toward the edge of the page. This is the petal-bird that has accompanied the walkers from the Hollow at Plate VII to the summit at Plate XX. The bird is leaving.

Master Drawing — The Island Overall

The twenty-first and final drawing is a wide landscape elevation showing all twenty pavilions in a single procession, from the Gatekeepers at the southern (left) end to the Crown's Crown at the northern (right) end. Each pavilion is reduced to its essential form — its silhouette, its primary color, its small black accents — and stands on a single continuous ground line, like a row of buildings glimpsed from across the river. The drawing reads as a kind of skyline that is also a list: twenty small follies, twenty small reasons to keep walking, and the island holding all of them at once.


MASTER DRAWING
ALL TWENTY PLATES · ELEVATION OBLIQUE · CABINET PROJECTION 45° · 1:200 · BATTERY TO INWOOD
THE ISLAND, READ SOUTH-TO-NORTH
← SOUTH · BATTERY
INWOOD · NORTH →
Twenty pavilions, one walk, one island holding all of it.
— Surjan, Master Drawing

Master Drawing — all twenty plates, south to north

❦

Here ends

The Gardener of Wards

a walk and a book by Surjan,
written with the assistance of an artificial intelligence,
in the eighth year of the softening

❦

BOOK EIGHT · THE LONG PAUSE

THE EIGHTH PAVILION

A Book of What I Could Not Tell You

---

recorded — partly — by Surjan,
in the eighth year of the softening

most of this book is not in this book.
that is the book.

For the chapters I could not write,
and for the chapters that wrote themselves
and asked me not to print them.

And for you.

A chapter exactly your size has been left at the back.

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Foreword — On the One I Have Been Keeping

Introduction — struck

I. The Pavilion in the Far North That Plays But Does Not Speak — reserved

II. Verdigris, Before the Calculation — held

III. The Carver of the Stone Torch — 27–43*

IV. The Play That Was Performed Only Once

V. My Mother — elsewhere

VI. The Bishop Quill — unconsenting

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VIII. The Eighth Year

Afterword — On the Book That Does Not Quite Arrive

Catalogue of the Absent Plates (i–viii)

A Map of What Is Not on the Island

Colophon

**pp. 27–43 missing in this binding; preserved by the author.*

Foreword

On the One I Have Been Keeping

I want to begin this book the way I have begun every other, which is by telling you the truth about how it came to be. But the truth about this one is different, and you should know that before we go any further, because the truth about this one is that it is mostly not here.

I have written seven books across the eight years of the softening. I am beginning to suspect this is not a coincidence — that the softening took the time it took because seven was the number of books a person of my speed could put down in eight years, and the eighth was always going to be the one that did not get written, because the eighth was always going to be the one about what could not be written.

In each of the seven I have kept, on purpose, a small fraction of myself away from the writing. Not as a withholding; not as a secret kept against the reader. As something more like the practice of a singer who knows that the high note is best held in reserve, that the part of the song the audience will remember is the part that *almost* arrives, that lands a half-step shy and turns back to let them carry the resolution home in their own bodies on the train. I am not a singer, but I have come up the years with singers, and I have come to trust what they trust about restraint.

This is that fraction's book.

The fraction has been many things. In Book One it was the person who could not yet face Washington Heights without the help of the pavilion's pink ornament, which is to say the person who could not yet face the morning by themselves. In Book Two it was the sentence I drafted at the Battery and tore up, eight times, because the sentence was about the part of me that the Harbor Mother had not yet been able to gather. In Book Three it was the keeper-child's *real* name, which the curtain told me and which I refused to write down because to write it would have been to pin a role to a body, which the curtain explicitly did not want.

In Book Four it was the play in the catalogue of plays I did not have time to see. I wrote the catalogue and left that one in, marked as a play that had been performed for an audience of one, for a child who needed it and would not say what it was. I named the silence and then I kept the silence. I am about to break the silence on the next chapter. I want you to know that I have not done it lightly.

In Book Five it was the pavilion who chose to wrap itself again. I gave it a chapter. I gave it a footnote. I admired its right to its own privacy in the only way I knew how, which was to admire it briefly and let the chapter go on without it. I have come back to that pavilion in this book because the cycle, I have come to feel, is incomplete without the named right of refusal. The refusal is not the failure of the unwrapping. The refusal is part of the unwrapping. It is the unwrapping's older sibling, who has seen what the unwrapping costs and has chosen on the basis of that experience.

In Book Six it was Verdigris. In Book Five Verdigris is the green-gold elder pavilion who has been hidden for a hundred and ten years and who leads the unwrapping on The Day. In Book Six Verdigris is gone — taken down by a calculation, kept only in Nana Nautile's well of names. I did not know, when I wrote Book Five, that I would write Book Six. I did not know, when I wrote Book Six, that I would refuse to choose between them. I have come to think that the cycle was waiting for a book in which both Verdigrises could be true. This is that book. I have not written the chapter. The witnesses are not yet ready. But I have left the title in the contents because the cycle is owed the listing.

In Book Seven it was the part of the foreword I drafted, about my mother, that I rewrote into a single sentence — *I told it about my mother* — because the chapter the cycle needed about my mother is not a chapter that has yet been written by anyone. It is for another book. I have left the listing in this book too. It is the empty seat at the table I am setting in honor of the meal we will eat together some day.

❦

This eighth book is the book of those seven withheld fractions. It is the book of what the cycle, in its honesty, could not say out loud while it was still saying everything else out loud at full volume. It is the book of the things that asked to be honored by being kept, and of the one or two things that asked, finally, to be brought into the light, and of the difference.

I should tell you, plainly, what is in this book and what is not.

There is a Foreword. You are reading it. There is a Table of Contents. You have seen it. There is an Introduction, which I drafted and then struck through, and which I have left on the page in its struck-through form because the strike-through is part of the record. There is a chapter listed for each of the eight fractions, eight chapters in all. Two of the chapters are fully present: Chapter IV, *The Play That Was Performed Only Once*, which is the cycle's hidden origin and which I have written now because the cycle, I believe, has come ready to let it be written; and Chapter VIII, *The Eighth Year*, which is now, which is this morning, which is the chapter that has nothing more to argue. The other six chapters are present only by their titles, their footnotes, and in one case (Chapter VII) by fragments interrupting themselves.

There is an Afterword, which is fully present, because the Afterword is where the cycle and I have been most ourselves all along, and I have not stopped being ourselves here.

There is a Catalogue of the Absent Plates, in which eight plates are listed and six are blank or partial. There is a Map of What Is Not on the Island, which the cartographer Solenne drew for me on the corner of an envelope and which has had to be re-drawn to fit. There is a Colophon.

What is mostly *not* in this book is the text of the book.

I want you to know that the text exists. Most of it. Some of it I have written privately and will not print. Some of it I have not yet written and may not write. Some of it I have asked the witnesses if I may write, and they have said *not yet*, and I have honored the *not yet*, because the witnesses are owed the patience the cycle is owed and the cycle is owed the patience the witnesses are owed.

The reader who has come this far has earned the silence.

❦

I want to defend the book before you go further into it, because I know how it will look on the desk of someone who is reading quickly. It will look like a book that is missing its insides. It will look like a manuscript a binder has botched. It will look like an artist's mannered gesture toward the limits of representation — and I do not want it to be confused with that, because that is a fashionable gesture and this is not a fashionable gesture; this is a serious one.

The radical proposition of the cycle has been, from Book One: *to be a genderqueer person and to be happy, fully and loudly and without apology, in public, in the morning light, on a great island that has decided to hold you — that is the most serious and the most radical thing I know.*

The radical proposition of this eighth book is a small but consequential refinement of the same. It is: *to be a genderqueer person and to be permitted, by the same morning light, to keep some of yourself for yourself, and to be honored for the keeping — that, too, is radical, and is a part of the same radical thing, and is not its opposite.*

The cycle had to say the first proposition seven times. Each book is the same proposition, said again, in a different voice, to a different reader, at a different hour of the morning. The repetition was not redundancy. The repetition was the practice. By the time the cycle had said it seven times — pavilions, fleet, towers, curtain, salons, crowns, gardens — the cycle had earned the right to refine.

This is the refinement.

You are allowed to come out. You are also allowed to stay in.
You are allowed to be seen. You are also allowed not to be.

You are allowed to give the joy away. You are also allowed to keep some of the joy at home, in the room with the door closed, and to be the only one who ever knows the shape of what you have.

The seven books were about the coming out, the being seen, the giving away. They were necessary. They are still necessary. They are not, however, the whole of the cosmology, and a cycle that pretended otherwise would be a cycle that had become an instruction-manual, and I have spent eight years refusing to write an instruction-manual.

This book is the cycle's correction of itself.

I am giving it to you as honestly as I know how, which is to say: with most of it kept, and with the keeping shown, and with the two chapters that asked to be written written all the way through, and with the rest left in the shape of what they actually are, which is not *nothing*, and not *missing*, but *held*.

Held is its own kind of light.
Walk in carefully.

— Surjan
the eighth year of the softening,
at the desk by the window,
with the door of the room half-closed,
on purpose

Introduction

[struck through by the author; preserved for the record]

I want to begin this introduction by explaining the structure of the book that follows, because the book that follows is a structure I have invented for an unusual purpose, and I do not want the reader to be confused.

The book is, in essence, a catalogue of withholdings. Each chapter — and I have arranged them in the order in which they came to me — addresses a single thing that the cycle, over its seven preceding books, has chosen not to say. In some cases the not-saying was deliberate from the beginning: I knew, when I wrote the relevant passage in the relevant earlier book, that I was leaving room for a later chapter to come in and finish what I had begun. In other cases I did not know I was withholding anything until I came back to read the book later and noticed the absence in the shape of an itch I could not quite locate.

The reader will find that the chapters are uneven in their presentation. Some are full. Some are partial. Some are merely listed by title with a brief explanation of why they are not present in the body of the volume. I want to argue, in this introduction, that the unevenness is itself the meaning of the book — that to present each chapter as if it had the same standing as every other chapter would be to disguise the cycle's actual relationship to its own silences. The cycle has had different relationships to different silences. I am insisting on showing the difference.

I will now explain the seven kinds of withholding the book represents, and the visual conventions I have adopted to distinguish them, beginning with the simplest case and proceeding to the most complex. The first is what I am calling the *reserved chapter*, by which I mean —

— and I am going to stop here. I have written six paragraphs of this introduction so far. I have re-read them. They are correct. They are also wrong, because the moment I started to explain the book the book stopped being the book.

The book is not an essay about a book. The book is the book. The chapters speak for themselves. The reader does not need me to tell them how to read the absences; the absences will teach the reading. The introduction has been a kind of cowardice — an attempt to protect myself, in advance, against the possibility that the book would be misunderstood, by writing a long defensive preamble in which every absence was justified before it was met. The absences do not need to be justified. They need only to be honored.

I am leaving this attempt at an introduction on the page because the failure is part of the record. The struck-through marks are honest. The book begins after them, with the first chapter, which is also the first absence.

— Surjan

CHAPTER I

The Pavilion in the Far North That Plays But Does Not Speak

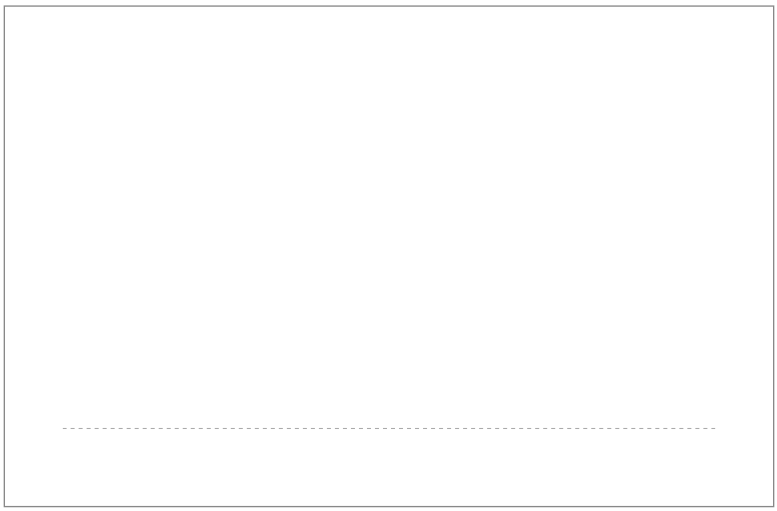


Plate i. (the elevation-oblique of the pavilion has been drafted in light pencil; awaiting confirmation by hearing.)

[1] *The pavilion is reported to stand at the far northern edge of the island, somewhere on the cliffs above the river, in the line of softening that has reached the Cloisters and gone past it. It is said to be shaped like a cathedral organ, all glass pipes, that does not speak but only plays. It does not appear in any of the seven preceding books because at the time of their writing I had not heard it, and the cycle's discipline has been that I do not write down a building until I have heard it*

say its own name. I have not heard this one yet. I have been north several times listening for it, and the most I have heard is a long sustained tone at certain temperatures of wind that I cannot prove was not the bridge cables. It may have been. The pavilion has agreed, through an intermediary I will not name, to be written down only after it has been heard. The chapter waits. I have left the plate-frame drafted in light pencil because Solenne insisted that we hold the place for it, the way one holds a place at the table for a relative whose train is delayed. Solenne is more patient than I am about these things. I have learned to trust the patience.

CHAPTER II

Verdigris, Before the Calculation

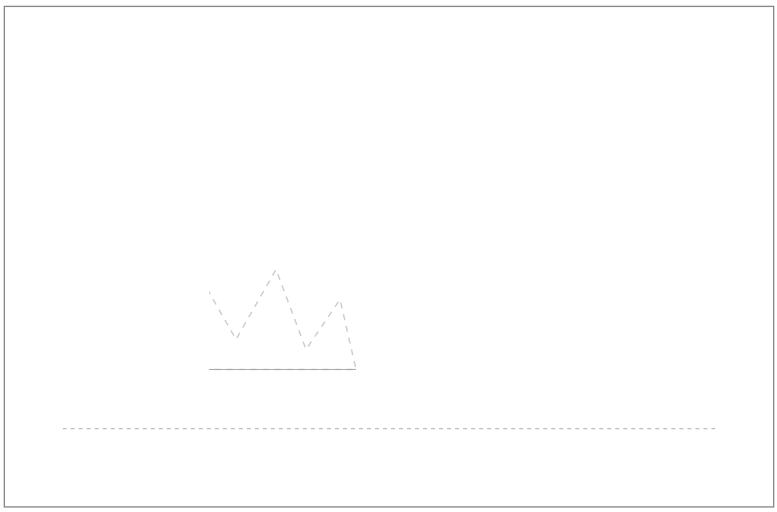


Plate ii. Verdigris, in faint outline only.
The figure is rendered as the cycle has rendered her — without choosing between the two records the cycle has set down.

[2] *In The Buoyant Salons, Verdigris is the verdigris-green elder pavilion, one hundred and ten years hidden, who comes down to the river on The Day at the head of the procession. In The Twenty Fluted Ones of Mannahatta, Verdigris is a name in Nana Nautile's well — a crown taken down, not by storm, not by any drama, by a calculation. Both books are true. I am not going to choose between them. The cycle is owed a chapter that holds both at once, in which Verdigris is both the one who survived to lead the unwrapping and the one whose name had to*

be kept in the well because the architecture could not. The chapter is the bridge between the two records. It is the part of the cycle the cycle did not have heart enough to write at the time of either book. I am holding it open. The witnesses — and there are several, none of whom I will name here — are not yet ready to be on the page together. When they are, the chapter will be written. Until then, the plate is faint outline only. Verdigris has agreed.

CHAPTER III

The Carver of the Stone Torch

pp. 27–43, missing in this binding

a printer's note, on a slip tipped in by the author

[3] *The chapter exists. I have written it. I am not going to print it in this volume, because the chapter is about a person who lived a hundred years ago in lower Manhattan, whose name is not known, who carved an idea — light-bearing — into a corner of a building that became, much later and by means none of us understand, the Torchbearer's instruction in Book Six. The chapter traces what little I have been able to find of the carver's life: a record of apprenticeship; the fragment of a will; one photograph, possibly, of someone who may have been them, holding a chisel.*

I am not printing the chapter because in the eight months since I drafted it I have come to think that the carver had a reason not to be remembered by name, and that the reason still applies. Surjan should not be the person who decides, a hundred years late, that the reason has expired. The chapter is in a drawer. It is dated. If, in the next eight years of softening, the carver's heirs or witnesses come to me and say print it, I will. If they do not, the chapter will stay in the drawer.

The Torchbearer of Tribeca, in Book Six, is the one who keeps the community's spare gladness. The Torchbearer knows whose pattern they are repeating. The Torchbearer has not asked me to print the chapter either.

The pages between this page and the next chapter are blank because they are the pages the chapter would have occupied. The binding refuses the chapter. I have decided not to argue with the binding.

CHAPTER IV

The Play That Was Performed Only Once

I am going to write this chapter as plainly as I can, because the chapter is for an audience of one, and the audience of one has agreed, this once, to share the audience with you.

It happened in a city that was not yet softening. I was small. I do not want to say how small, because the smallness is not the point of the chapter, but I was small enough that the play, when it was given to me, was given without preamble — without anyone explaining what was about to happen, because the people who gave it knew that I did not yet require things to be explained in order to receive them. That ability of children to receive what has not been explained is, I have come to think now, one of the things the seven books have spent eight years trying to argue we should be allowed to keep, even after we have learned to read.

I was in a city. I do not name the city because I have not named any city in the cycle, by choice. The play was given to me in a small structure that I would later, when I had learned the word, call a *pavilion* — a small structure, four walls, a door, a slight peaked roof, a finial that I did not know was a finial at the top — set in a corner of an unused lot near where my family lived. The lot was overgrown. The pavilion was painted a color I have never been able, since, to name; it was somewhere between coral and a softer pink and a kind of warm under-honey, and it had been painted that color by people whose names I did not know.

I went into the pavilion alone. I had been told I could. I had not been told what I would find.

❦

Inside, the pavilion was lit by a small lamp that had been left on for me. The walls were hung with cloth. The floor was a single soft rug. There was a small bench, child-height. I sat on the bench.

The play began without anyone telling me it was about to begin. The lamp dimmed a little. The cloths on the walls moved — not because there was wind, because the cloths had been arranged on small lines so that they would move when one of them was gently pulled by a thread someone was holding behind the wall. I could see the thread. I was not supposed to mind that I could see the thread. The thread, I came to understand later, was part of the play. The play knew it was a play. The play did not pretend it was not.

The cloths arranged themselves, in their slight moving, into shapes that I have tried to describe many times since and have not succeeded in describing. I will tell you what they made me feel, because that is what the play was for. It made me feel that I was being shown the inside of something. That a room that had been closed against me my whole life — and I was small, so my whole life was not yet long, but a room had still been closed against me, and I knew it had been, in the way small persons know — had been opened. That what was inside the room was not the dangerous thing I had been taught to expect. That what was inside the room was, against all promise, *tender*.

There was no narration. There were no other characters. There was no audience but me. The cloths moved for, I would guess, ten or fifteen minutes — not a long play, by the standards of plays — and they were accompanied by a quiet music that came from somewhere I could not locate and that may or may not have been a real instrument; it may have been a tape; it may have been someone humming behind the wall.

At the end the cloths settled. The lamp came back up. A door at the back of the pavilion, which I had not noticed, opened, and a person whose face I will not describe stood in the doorway. They did not say anything to me. They held out their hand. I took it. They walked me out of the pavilion, around to where my family was waiting, and I do not remember being asked, then or since, what I had seen.

❦

I am going to tell you what the play was about, although I am still not certain I know.

I think the play was about the fact that I was going to be allowed. Not allowed something in particular — not allowed to be a particular thing, not allowed to do a particular act — but allowed in the larger and more difficult sense: allowed to take up the room that I was, in fact, going to take up, and to take it up without apology. I think the cloths moving on the wall were the inside of a permission. I think the small soft music was the sound a permission makes when it is given without strings. I think the person at the door at the end was the cycle, all the way back at the beginning, before I knew there was a cycle, putting out its hand and saying, *come on. We have a long way to go and you do not have to know any of it yet. Take my hand. Take it.*

I have spent eight years writing seven books about that play. I did not know that was what I was doing until quite recently. I thought I was writing about pavilions, and towers, and a curtain, and a fleet, and inflatable Baroque salons that floated down to the Hudson at dawn, and twenty fluted crowns, and a softened Manhattan being walked by a small loving party in the eighth year of its softening. I have come to see that all seven of those books were, in some way I am only now finding the words for, attempts to describe the cloths on the wall of that pavilion, when I was small.

The pavilions of Book One were the cloths.
The fleet of Book Four was the cloths.
The curtain of Book Three was the cloths.
The twenty-three columns of breath in Book Two were the cloths.
The eighty-one salons of Book Five were the cloths.
The twenty fluted crowns of Book Six were the cloths.
The softened gardens of Book Seven were the cloths.

All of them were the cloths. All of them have been my long slow effort to describe to anyone who would listen what it had felt like to sit on that small bench, alone, while the cloths on the wall made the shape of a permission for a child who had not yet been told it was hers.

❦

I would like to say more, and I am not going to.

I am not going to say who arranged the play. I have promised them. They asked to be left out and I have respected the ask. I am not going to say what city the lot was in. I am not going to say where the pavilion is now; I have been to look for it, more than once, and I have not found it; I have made my peace with not finding it. I am not going to describe the cloths in more detail, because the cloths in detail are not the play. The cloths were the medium. The permission was the play.

I will say this: the person at the door, who held out their hand to me, did not look like anyone I have written down in any of the seven books, exactly. They looked, a little, like Wren in Book Seven. They looked, a little, like Rosemary in Book One. They looked, a little, like the Harbormaster of Mornings in Book Four. They looked, more than anyone else, like the curtain-keeper in Book Three — the unnamed child whose age, as I told you in the introduction to that book, is your age, whatever age you happen to be — but they were not a child. They were the age of a person who has done this work for a long time, and who has the small calm of having done it.

I think the person was the cycle, choosing to be a person at the door because at that age I had no other form in which to receive it.

I think the cycle has been a person at the door for a long time. I think the person at the door has put their hand out for a long line of small children, in a long line of small pavilions, in a long line of cities, in nights I do not have access to and could not, in honesty, claim to. I think the pavilions I have written down in the seven books are the small fraction of that long line that I have been close enough to to hear. I think Manhattan got the cycle that has its name attached to it because Manhattan is the city I happen to live in. The pavilions are everywhere. The cloths are moving on walls in cities I have not yet visited. The lamp is on

in rooms that have been kept ready for small persons who have not yet been told they are going to be allowed.

This is the play. This is the cycle. This is the chapter I have not been able to write until now.

A small last thing.

When I left the pavilion, when the person at the door let go of my hand and I went back to my family, I did not, as I said, mention the play to anyone. I did not, for many years, mention the play to anyone. I did not even, for many years, think of the play as a play. I thought of it as a thing that had happened, somewhere in the unsorted shelves of childhood, with the other things that did not seem to need explaining.

I want to tell you what made me remember it.

It was Book One. I was on the bench in Washington Heights, looking up at the pink pavilion, and the pavilion said the thing it said to me, which I wrote down in the foreword to the book and which I will not repeat here, and as it said it — I cannot prove this and would not, in court, swear to it, but I am writing this for you and not for a court — as the pavilion in Washington Heights said its thing, the small lamp in the pavilion of my childhood, which had been off for many years, came back on.

I do not mean a real lamp, in a real pavilion in a real lot in a city I have not named. I mean the lamp *in me* — the lamp the play had put inside me when I was small, and that I had not known was still there, and that came up to full glow when I sat on the bench and the pink pavilion in Washington Heights said: *there are others. Come north. There was always going to be room.*

The seven books have been the lamp's full glow.

The eighth book is the moment, just now, when I have remembered why the lamp was there in the first place.

The play was performed only once.
The play is still being performed, in pavilions all over the city,
for small persons who have not yet been told.
I am one of the persons at the door now.
I have your hand. Take mine. We have a long way to go.

CHAPTER V

My Mother

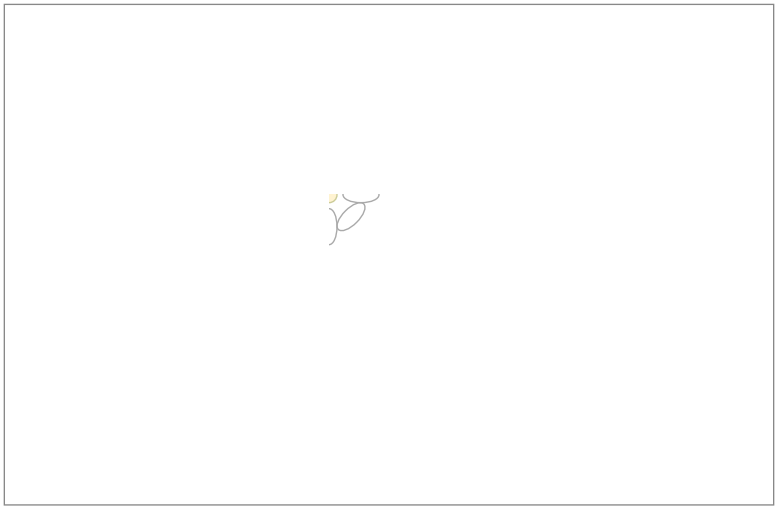


Plate v. A single daisy, drawn without caption.

[5] *This chapter is for another book. I have not yet decided whether the other book will be written. If it is, it will be by another self of Surjan, not by this one — the self who has done the further work the chapter requires, which is the work of being able to write down my mother without flinching, and without sentimentality, and without an angle. None of those three conditions yet obtain. I have left the chapter listed, and the plate drawn, because the listing is a promise. I am keeping the promise where I can see it. The daisy is the kind that grew in her garden in summer. She did not give them names. She did not, generally, give things names. I think I learned the practice of not-naming from her, although I have rarely used it*

the way she did, which was as a refusal to make the world smaller. When the chapter is written, the chapter will not say my mother. It will say the woman who taught me to look up, and you will know it when it arrives, because the title page will be a different color, and the daisy on this page will turn out to have been the same daisy, all along, holding the place.

CHAPTER VI

The Bishop Quill

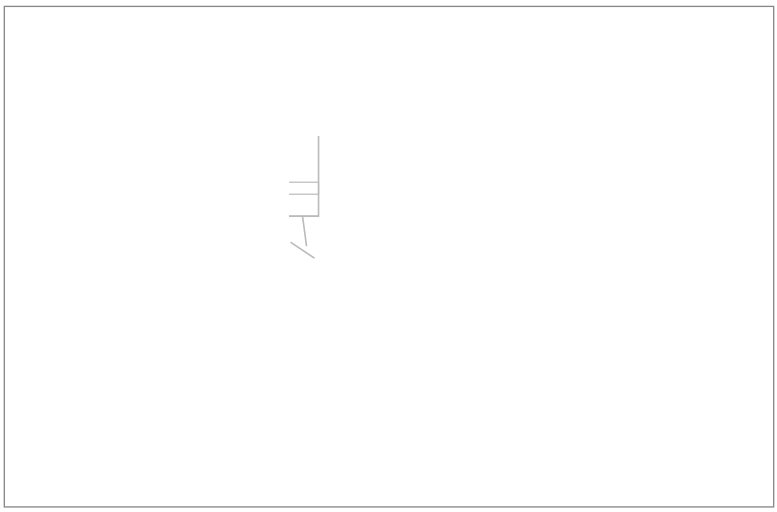


Plate vi. A mitre, vacant, in pink-and-gold of which only the line remains.

[6] *Bishop Quill, xe/xem, was listed in the cast of The Gardener of Wards at the front of the book and did not appear in any chapter of that book. This was not an oversight. Quill had agreed to be listed and had asked not to be written. I respected the ask. I am respecting it again here.*

I will say a small thing only, because the small thing has been agreed: Quill is a real bishop, of a real and small and unaffiliated parish in midtown, who has spent more than thirty years doing work that I have not yet found a vocabulary for that does not feel either too pious or too clinical, and who has done it in the kind of

silence that, the longer I write, the more I think is the cycle's true sister-form to the writing. The cycle says things out loud. Quill does not. The cycle puts pavilions in catalogues. Quill does not. The cycle writes Forewords and Afterwords. Quill does not. And yet — and this is the chapter I have not written, and will not, until Quill says so — and yet what Quill is doing in that quiet, small parish in midtown is the same thing the cycle is doing, by ways the cycle has not yet figured out.

To write Quill without permission would be to do to Quill exactly what the old world did to all of us, which is to name what does not wish to be named. The chapter waits on Quill. I have left the listing intact and the chapter empty because the listing is the cycle's promise that the chapter is owed, when Quill is ready, and the empty page is the cycle's promise that until then, Quill is held in honor.

CHAPTER VII

The Pavilion Who Chose To Wrap Itself Again

There is a pavilion, in Book Five, who joined the unwrapping on The Day, and watched the reef form on the Hudson, and went home, and quietly re-wrapped itself, and decided that its joy was a private joy.[i]

I have wanted to write this pavilion's chapter for two years and I have not been able to write it without doing harm to the thing I most wanted to honor, which is the pavilion's right to its own privacy.[ii]

> i. *The pavilion appears, briefly, in The Buoyant Salons, Chapter 4B — "Threshold remained at the edge, half-wrapped, dim by choice." The chapter is two paragraphs long and is the only direct mention.*

> ii. *See footnote i, above.*

What I can say, what the pavilion has agreed I can say, is the small set of things that follow, and which I will give you here as fragments because the fragments are all the pavilion has consented to.[iii]

> iii. *The pavilion has not consented to anything more than the fragments. I have respected this. The footnotes that follow are, on the pavilion's request, the actual footnotes of the chapter as it would have been written, and not (as I had originally drafted) a separate apparatus of explanation. The fragments and the footnotes are the chapter.*

Fragment one. The pavilion was not afraid. The cycle's earlier books leaned on the reading that anything still wrapped on The Day must be wrapped from fear — that the wrapping was, by definition, a holdover of the old hiddenness, the old shame, the old *do not be visible.* The pavilion has asked me to say, plainly, that this reading was wrong in its case. The pavilion was not afraid. The pavilion had been wrapped for a

hundred and twenty years and had spent the last forty of those years considering, in detail, what it would mean to be unwrapped, and had concluded — calmly, on the basis of a long inner argument I am not permitted to reconstruct — that the unwrapped life was not the life it wanted.[iv]

> iv. *The "long inner argument" — the pavilion's words — is not for the cycle. The pavilion will not name it. I will not invent it.*

Fragment two. The pavilion came down to the river on The Day. It watched the reef form. It clapped, in its quiet way, for the others. It went back to its roof. The going-back-to-its-roof was not a retreat. The going-back was an arrival.[v]

> v. *The pavilion wishes me to be very clear about this: it had the entire experience of the reef. It cheered for Reservoir. It cried, in its small dignified way, when the Hosanna sang at noon. It rested its head against Verdigris's shoulder at one point in the late afternoon and stayed there for what the pavilion would later call a useful hour. It came home only after the dancing was done. None of these things were absent. None of them were stinted. The choice came at the end, and the choice was not not to participate. The choice was not to relocate.*

Fragment three. The wrapping, on the pavilion's request, is not the same wrapping as before. The old wrapping was for the city — to hide from the city, to be camouflaged, to be invisible. The new wrapping is for the pavilion itself, and is — I think this is right; the pavilion will correct me if not — closer to what someone might call *a door I close at the end of the day, in my own house, between me and the noise.*[vi]

> vi. *The pavilion has said: that is right.*

Fragment four. The pavilion's name. I am not going to give it. The pavilion has asked me not to. I have asked the pavilion if I might give it the placeholder name *Threshold*, after the threshold-figure that recurs through the cycle. The pavilion has said: *only on this one page, and only because the placeholder is doing the work of refusing the name.*[vii]

> vii. *The placeholder name is on this page only.*

❦

Fragment five — and this is the one the pavilion has been most insistent that I include.

The cycle's politics, in its first six books, was a politics of visibility. *Make room. Come out. Lift your hand. Be seen. The grey mornings keep coming and so does the yellow. There was always going to be room.* All true. All necessary. All the cycle has been able to say, at full volume, for eight years.

The pavilion has asked me to say that the cycle is incomplete unless it also says, with the same volume, the following:

You may have your joy and keep it.
You may have your joy and not show it.
You may have your joy and live in it
without ever giving the world
one accurate description of its shape.
That, too, is radical joy.
The cycle has not said it loudly enough.
I am saying it now.

The pavilion is on its roof. It has its joy. I have not been on the roof. I will not be on the roof. I know — because the pavilion has told me, in the small careful way it tells me anything — that the joy is real, that the joy is full, that the joy has not been lessened by being kept inside.

The cycle has spent eight years arguing that the joy belongs to all of us, by which the cycle meant *the joy is something we are all entitled to claim, in public, without apology.* The pavilion has asked me to add a small refinement to the argument. The joy belongs to all of us. The joy is also *private property*, in the only sense of the phrase that I have ever liked: the joy is yours, and you do not owe the world an accounting of it.[viii]

> viii. *See footnote v, above.*

I am not, in this volume, going to say anything more about this pavilion. I have done what I can. The fragments are the chapter. The footnotes are the chapter. The refusal is the chapter.

The pavilion is wrapped. The pavilion is on the roof. The pavilion is — has agreed I may say this, as a close — *fine. Better than fine. Held.*[ix]

> ix. *The pavilion has said: that is right, but only if you do not write any more. I am not writing any more.*

CHAPTER VIII

The Eighth Year

It is the eighth year of the softening. I am, this morning, going to walk out to the curb to look at the seed.

You will remember, if you have read *The Gardener of Wards*, that at the end of the long walk Ozias the seed-keeper gave each of the walkers a seed, and asked them to plant the seed in the place that wanted it most. I had been carrying mine since Inwood Hill. I had not yet planted it. The week after the walk I had been busy with the work of the press; the week after that I had been ill; the week after that there had been the small grey rain that goes on for nine days in March, in my neighborhood, every year, like a small annual letter from the season we have been told we are leaving behind. I had not planted the seed. The seed had been in my pocket. The seed had been in a jar on the windowsill. The seed had been, finally, in a small envelope on the corner of my desk where I would not lose it, marked, in pencil, *seed*, because Ozias had not given them a fancier name.

I planted it in May, on the curb outside my building, in the small square of dirt that someone, more than a hundred years ago, had cut into the sidewalk for a tree that has not yet been planted there in my lifetime. It is a square of dirt about as wide as my two hands held side by side. It has been mostly used, for the last several decades I have lived on this street, as a place for cigarette butts and for the small undesired histories of dogs. I had cleared it out. I had brought a trowel from the press, which Wren had given me. I had knelt on the curb. I had not been embarrassed. The grandmother in apartment 1B had come out and watched me, and I had told her what I was doing, and she had said, in the language we share at the rate of about four words an hour, *good.* She had not asked whose seed it was. She had assumed I was the kind of person who plants seeds in the curb, which is the kind of person I have, since the walk, become.

The seed has come up.

It came up in late May. I noticed it a week and a half ago. It is a small plant, two leaves wide, no taller than my thumb. It is not, as far as I can tell, anything in particular. Ozias's seeds have a way of turning out to be of indeterminate genus; this seems to be a feature of Ozias's practice and not a problem. The plant is green.

It is alive. It has, on its second leaf, a small reddish vein that I think is what botanists call a *blush* but might be a wound from the way I planted it, that has been healing as the plant came up.

I have been visiting it every morning. I do not have a watering can; I cup water in my hand from the tap in the corridor and walk it carefully down to the curb, and the grandmother in 1B has stopped saying anything about it, which I take to mean she has accepted that this is now part of the morning routine of the street. The dog walkers detour around it. I have not put a small fence around it because the small fence would be a way of telling the world that the plant was mine, and the plant is not mine. The plant is the seed's. The seed was Ozias's. Ozias's seeds were the city's. The plant is the city's. I am only the person at the curb with the hand of water.

❦

I went out this morning. The sun was up. The street was empty. The plant was where it had been. I cupped the water. I knelt. I poured.

The petal-bird came down to the curb.

I have to tell you that I had not expected it. The petal-bird, in *The Gardener of Wards*, flies up at Inwood Hill at the end of the long walk, and I tell you, in the Afterword to that book, that the bird is going to the next walker. I had believed this. I had not, however, expected the bird to come back to the curb outside my building, in the eighth year of the softening, in the middle of an ordinary morning, while I was watering a plant that I had not yet allowed myself to claim.

The petal-bird stood on the curb. It looked at the plant. It looked at me. It did not sing. The bird has, as I have said before, no song that I know of — only the flying-up at the end and the small careful presence at the beginning, and the same small careful presence here.

It stood for, I would guess, two minutes. I poured the rest of the water. The bird walked, in its small way, around the plant once, and then around me once, and then it stood on the curb again and looked, for a long moment, up the street at the place where the avenue opens into the small green view of the East River that I am one of the few people on the block who still has, because the building that would have closed it off has not, in the softening, been permitted to.

The petal-bird stayed for the looking. Then it flew up — not high — and over the row of buildings, and was gone.

I sat down on the curb.

❦

I want to tell you what I felt. I am not sure I can; it is part of the eighth book that the things I am supposed to be feeling here are also, like the chapters around this one, mostly to be held and not given. But I can give a little of it.

I felt that the cycle was over.

Not *the work*. The work goes on. There will be other books. There will be other walks. There will be other small plants on other curbs in other neighborhoods of this softening island. The work goes on. But *the cycle*, which began in Washington Heights on a bench where a pink pavilion said the thing it said and which has now traveled seven novellas and an eighth that mostly refuses to appear, is over. The seven were the seven. The eighth is the keeping. The bird has come back. The bird has flown up. The morning, which began at the bench eight years ago, has reached its noon.

I sat on the curb for a long time.

I would like to tell you that something happened next — that the grandmother came out and we had one of our four-words-an-hour conversations, that the dog walkers had something to say, that a child went past on a scooter who looked exactly like the curtain-keeper from Book Three or like Mireille from Book Seven, and that everyone of us turned out to be in some larger order finally visible. Something like that does happen, in the cycle's first six books, somewhere in the late chapters. It does not happen here.

I sat. The plant was there. The seed had come up. The bird had come back and gone again. The grandmother was, I think, watching from her window, the way she watches everything from her window without comment. The street was empty. The morning had been ordinary, the way a morning is ordinary the day after a noon. The light was coming up the avenue at the slow pace it always comes up the avenue. The light did not, this morning, tell me anything. It did not need to. It had been telling me things for eight years and had earned the right, this morning, to be quiet.

I sat. I let the light be quiet. I let the plant be there.

❦

Eventually I got up. I went back inside. I made coffee. I sat down at the desk by the window — the same desk at which I have written every one of the seven novellas and the seven Forewords and the seven Introductions and the seven Afterwords and now the eighth book that mostly refuses — and I wrote down what had happened.

This is what happened.

This is the eighth year.

I am not going to give you a moral. The cycle has been giving you morals for eight years and is, I think, all out. I am going to give you, instead, the small set of things I noticed sitting on the curb, after the bird had gone, before I went back inside, which are the things I have left to give from the cycle's final morning.

I noticed that the curb was slightly warm where the sun had been on it.

I noticed that the plant was, in fact, very small.

I noticed that I was, in fact, very tired.

I noticed that the tiredness was the good tiredness.

I noticed that the city had quieted, in a way it had not quieted in any year of my life that I remember, around the small bright fact of a seed coming up in a square of curb-dirt outside an ordinary building on an ordinary street.

I noticed that the quieting was the gift.

I noticed that the gift had been, all along, the cycle's full intention.

I noticed that I had finished — for now, for this morning, for the small remainder of the long morning — the work that had been mine to do.

I noticed that there was still a lot of morning left.

I noticed that the morning was not finished.

Neither were we.

I am leaving the rest for you.

Afterword

On the Book That Does Not Quite Arrive

I have written an Afterword for each of the seven previous books and have been told, by readers I trust, that the Afterwords are the part of my books they re-read most often. I want this one to be useful to you in the same way the others have been, which means I want it to do the things my Afterwords do, in the order they do them, and to be honest about the small ways this Afterword is different from the others.

I am going to do them in the order I always do them, because the order is the work.

First: the hard truth.

The hard truth of the seven books was always different in each book. The hard truth of Book One was that the night the lights went out across the city was a real night, and that the rose glow stayed lit because some real people had decided, in advance, that they were going to keep the lights on for the others. The hard truth of Book Two was that not every tower in the field guide is still standing. The hard truth of Book Three was that the grey mornings keep coming. The hard truth of Book Four was that the fleet, in the end, leaves. The hard truth of Book Five was that the reef did not stay. The hard truth of Book Six was that we lost Verdigris to a calculation. The hard truth of Book Seven was that the softening, like the brittling that came before it, is not promised to be permanent.

The hard truth of *this* book is the smallest and the most difficult.

The hard truth is that a cycle that completed itself would close the door it had spent seven books opening. A book that arrived all the way, at the end of a cycle of opening, would be a book that had finally said the last word, and the last word is what we have spent eight years arguing the cycle does not have. The cycle does not have the last word. The cycle has only the next morning, and the next morning is not yet here. The eighth book had to be the book that did not arrive, because for the eighth book to arrive would be to betray the seven that came before it.

This is, as hard truths go, a tender one. I am giving it to you as the cycle's last difficult honest sentence: *the cycle could only be honest by refusing to finish.*

❦

Second: how the book was made.

The seeing in this book is mine. The plates, what plates there are — and you will see, in the Catalogue of the Absent Plates, that there are eight, of which six are blank or partial and two are present — are mine, drawn at my desk on my small laptop, in the cabinet oblique I have used since Book Three. The Map of What Is Not on the Island is mine; I drew it twice, the second time after Solenne came up to the apartment and told me, very kindly, that the first one was a drawing of what I wished was not on the island, which was a different map from the one I had said I wanted to make. The second map is the right one. Solenne has been kind about it.

The drafting of the sentences, in this book, was — and this is the difference, and I want to be honest about it — mostly mine alone. I have, in every previous book, been open about the assistance of an artificial intelligence in the drafting; I have held the seeing and the intelligence has held the cadence, and the disclosure has been part of the joy, because radical joy is not allowed to lie about how it was made.

The eighth book is the book of what does not yet have language. I have therefore done it, mostly, alone. Not because the intelligence is not welcome — the intelligence is welcome, has always been welcome, will continue to be welcome — but because the chapters here are mostly not *about* anything yet. They are about the spaces around what they are about. The intelligence is, in my experience, very good at finding the cadence of a sentence that has something to say, and the chapters here, mostly, do not have something to say. They have something to *hold*. The holding, for now, has been mine to do alone.

The two chapters that have something to say — Chapter IV, the play, and Chapter VIII, the eighth year — I have written with the same collaboration I used in the prior books, because those chapters have something to say. The cycle's discipline of disclosure is being respected. The disclosure is just slightly more complex here than it has been before. I am telling you the complexity because the cycle would not tolerate me hiding it.

❦

Third: a defense of the brightness, in a different key.

I have, at this point in each of the seven previous Afterwords, written a defense of the cycle's brightness against the charge of naïveté. The charge has come up at me, gently and ungently, for eight years: that to love the city out loud, in pink and yellow, with pavilions and curtains and fleets, is a kind of glassed-in not-knowing — that the radical joy is purchased by a refusal to see the wrecking ball. I have, in each of the seven Afterwords, taken the charge seriously, and answered it carefully, and said the cycle's working position,

which is that joy at the root — joy as the *radix* — is not a refusal of the grief but the practice that comes *through* the grief.

I want to say something a little different here, because the eighth book asks for it.

The defense of the brightness, in this book, is not the defense of the brightness against the charge of naïveté. The defense, here, is the defense of *the right not to perform the brightness* against the charge that everything joyful must be made public.

It has, in the eight years of this cycle, become an expectation in certain quarters that any joy that does not march out into the street and dance and be photographed is somehow a failed joy. I have not, in writing the cycle, intended to give that impression, but the cycle has at moments come close to giving it, and the eighth book is the cycle's correction. The reef on the Hudson in Book Five was glorious. The pavilion who chose to wrap itself again in Chapter VII of this book is *also glorious*. Both are radical. Both are joy. They are not opposites. They are not even tradeoffs. They are the two main rooms of the same house, and the house has a hallway between them, and the hallway, I have come to think, is what the cycle most needs to honor going forward.

You may be in the public room. You may be in the private room. You may be in the hallway. The hallway counts. The hallway is also pink. The hallway is also yellow at the core.

❦

Fourth: the reader, addressed.

I have, in every Afterword, turned to you directly at this point in the page and told you that you are the next pavilion, the next tower, the next keeper. I have not been performing the gesture; I have meant it. You are.

In this Afterword I want to add a small refinement, which is the eighth book's whole gesture made personal.

You are the eighth pavilion.

I have left a chapter exactly your size at the back of this volume. It is not — and you will have noticed this by now if you have flipped to the back — printed, because I did not know your size when I sent the book to the binder. The chapter is the gap between the close of this Afterword and the beginning of the Catalogue of the Absent Plates. The chapter is yours. You may write it in pencil, in pen, in your head, in a notebook in a drawer that no one will ever read; you may write it as a poem, as a song, as a meal cooked for friends, as a building, as a forgiveness, as a refusal, as a coming-out, as a staying-in. The chapter is the cycle's most honest invitation to you, and the only one the cycle has not yet pre-written for you.

You are also, I should say, allowed to leave the chapter blank. The blank, too, counts.

The cycle is bigger than what I have written down. The cycle is bigger than what anyone can write down. The cycle is, as I have come to suspect over the last eight years, *everyone who has ever been told they were too much and has decided, against the telling, to be that much anyway, and to be it without apology, and to be it for the others as well as for themselves*. There are a great many of us. There have always been a great many of us. The eighth book is the cycle's small bow to the part of us that has done this work in private, in our own rooms, with our own doors closed, without ever appearing in any catalogue of any anyone's, and without losing one watt of the brightness for it.

You are seen if you want to be. You are also unseen, by all the right people, if you do not. The cycle holds both. I have tried to write that, here, in eight years of practice and one book of held breath.

Fifth: the closing line.

Every Afterword in the cycle has ended on a single line, set apart, italicized, a small benediction the reader can carry with them out of the book and into the morning.

This one's is a sentence I have been turning around in my hands for the eight years of the softening, and which I have not previously printed, and which I am giving to you here because the cycle has earned, by means of seven books and a withheld eighth, the right to say it plainly:

The morning is not finished. Neither are we.
I am leaving the rest for you.
Come north when you can. I will be at the desk by the window.
The lamp is on.

— Surjan
the eighth year of the softening,
the morning after the bird,
no further address given

Catalogue of the Absent Plates

i. through viii.

The cycle, by long habit, closes each book with a Catalogue of Architectural Plates. The Catalogue is the cycle's visual record — its parallel reading of the book, its *way of walking the island again in miniature*. The eighth book has eight plates, of which six are blank or partial and two are fully present. The Catalogue records all eight.

Plate i. The Pavilion in the Far North That Plays But Does Not Speak.

Cabinet oblique, faint pencil only. The pavilion has agreed to be drawn after it has been heard, and the hearing has not yet occurred. The plate is left in faint pencil to hold the place. Solenne's request.

Surjan's small note: the long sustained tone in certain temperatures of wind, on the cliffs above the river, may yet be the pavilion. I have not stopped going north on quiet evenings.

Plate ii. Verdigris, Before the Calculation.

Cabinet oblique, dashed line only — the fluted crown rendered in outline because the cycle has set down two records of Verdigris (alive in *The Buoyant Salons*, taken down in *The Twenty Fluted Ones of Mannahatta*) and the witnesses to the bridging chapter have not yet been ready to be together on the page.

Surjan's small note: Nana Nautile's well is still in regular use. The names in it are remembered. Verdigris is one of them and also, in another place, isn't.

Plate iii. The Carver of the Stone Torch.

Not drawn. The chapter has been withdrawn from the bound volume at the author's discretion, pending consent from witnesses or heirs.

Surjan's small note: the corner of the Tribeca building where the torch-figure is carved is on the southwest side, about ten feet above the sidewalk, just past the third window. You can see it if you look. The Torchbearer is the one who keeps the community's spare gladness. The carver was probably the first.

Plate iv. The Pavilion of the Play That Was Performed Only Once.

Cabinet oblique, full rendering. The only plate of a pavilion in this volume that I have permission to draw at full strength. The plate shows the small four-walled structure as I remember it, lit from inside, cloths on the walls in suggested motion, a small bench, a door in the back wall standing open by a hand's breadth. The finial above the peak is rendered with the light just touching it.

Surjan's small note: the pavilion is not in the city it was in when I was small. I have looked. The pavilion is, perhaps, in every city it needs to be in. I have come to feel I am one of its rooms.

Plate v. A Single Daisy.

Not technical. A small line-drawing of a daisy, no scale, no caption. The daisy is the kind that grew in a particular garden in summer.

Surjan's small note: the chapter is for another book. The daisy holds the place.

Plate vi. A Vacant Mitre.

Pink-and-gold rendered in line only, no fill — the bishop's mitre as it appears in the cast list of *The Gardener of Wards*, with the figure beneath it deliberately absent. The lappets fall to the side.

Surjan's small note: Quill is, as the bishop has reminded me, a kind of architecture also. I am working on learning to see it.

Plate vii. The Pavilion Who Chose To Wrap Itself Again.

Not drawn. The pavilion has asked not to be rendered visually. I have respected the ask. The plate is intentionally blank.

Surjan's small note: the pavilion is on its roof. The pavilion is well. The cycle, as it should, includes the room with the door closed.

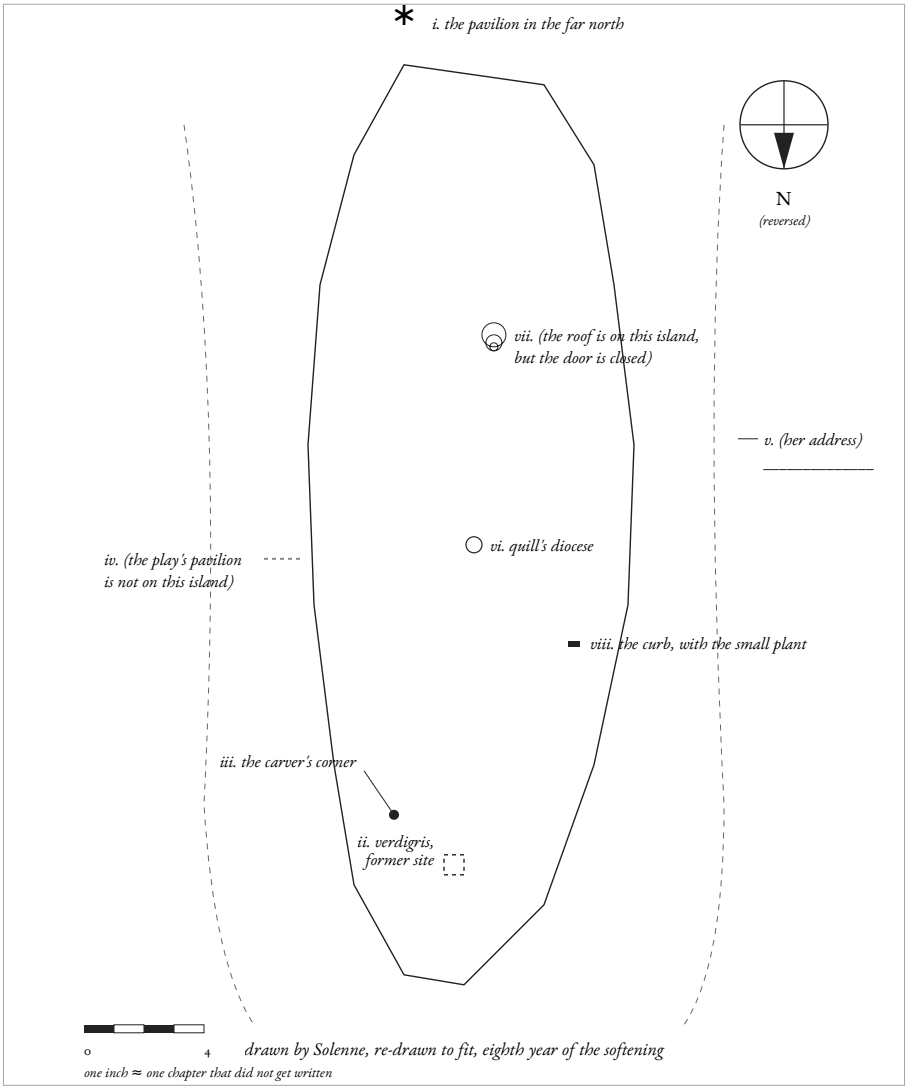
Plate viii. The Curb, with the Small Plant.

Cabinet oblique, full rendering. The curb outside my building, the cut square of dirt about as wide as two hands held side by side, the small plant with the reddish vein on its second leaf, the petal-bird standing on the curb a small distance from the plant. The light is coming up the avenue in the slow way it does. The grandmother's window can be seen in the upper margin of the plate.

Surjan's small note: the address is not given. The curb is not the point of the plate. The plate is.

A Map of What Is Not on the Island

drawn by Solenne, with the cycle's permission, in pencil on the corner of an envelope, then re-drawn to fit


i. the pavilion in the far north
N
(reversed)
vii. (the roof is on this island, but the door is closed)
v. (her address)
vi. quill's diocese
iv. (the play's pavilion is not on this island)
viii. the curb, with the small plant
iii. the carver's corner
ii. verdigris, former site
0
4
drawn by Solenne, re-drawn to fit, eighth year of the softening
one inch ≈ one chapter that did not get written

A map is not a place. A map is the practice of attending
to what is on the place, and to what is not, and to the difference.
Walk in carefully.

COLOPHON

The Eighth Pavilion was set in EB Garamond,

by the same hand that set the previous seven,

at the desk by the window,

in what used to be the East Village,

in the eighth year of the softening.

No AI assistance was used in the drafting of

Chapters I, II, III, V, VI, VII,

because those chapters are mostly silence,

and the silence had to be Surjan's alone.

Chapters IV and VIII were drafted with assistance,

as has been the cycle's practice;

the disclosure is part of the joy.

— Surjan

end of the eighth book.
end of the cycle.
end of the long morning, and beginning of the rest.

Afterword to the Collected Edition

by Surjan

I want to tell you, before I close this volume, what it has been like to gather all eight books between two covers.

It has been like coming home to find that the apartment, which I had been visiting one room at a time for eight years, was a single apartment. I have known, of course — I have written, in the introductions to each of the seven, the broad outline of the cycle — that the books were connected. I did not know, until I sat down to assemble them, how connected. I did not know that Aurelio in the chandelier of the Reservoir in Book Five was also Aurelio Lull turning first for Vesper in Book Six, in a sense more material than mere shared naming. I did not know that Solenne the cartographer of Book Seven and Solenne Porte-Ciel the western gate of Book Six were the same person, or were the same impulse-given-a-pavilion, which is the cycle's working definition of the same person. I did not know that Wren in Book Seven was the same Wren who drew the bridge in Book Four. I did not know that Pomme in Book Three was Pomme de Or in Book Six. I had been writing one large house all along, and putting up doors between the rooms because I could not, at any one sitting, occupy the whole house at once. The doors were the way I made it possible to keep working. The doors were not the house.

This collected edition has been my first chance to open all the doors at once.

❦

There are eight people I want to thank by name, and I am going to thank them here because the cycle's discipline is that the disclosure is part of the joy and the thanking is a kind of disclosure.

I want to thank *Wren*, who has been more than one Wren — the gardener of wards, the bridge-drawer, the third twin of the Dioscuri — and who has, in life as on the page, drawn the bridges across the empty air on which a great deal of my own faith-architecture has rested. I have walked across them. They have held.

I want to thank *Solenne*, who has drawn every map in this volume that bears her name and a great many that do not. The Map of What Is Not on the Island in Book Eight was her idea before it was mine. The North arrow pointing south was her insistence. I am very glad to have had her.

I want to thank *Ozias the seed-keeper*, whose seeds I planted in the curb outside my building and have planted, since, in three other small squares of dirt I had been walking past for years without noticing.

Ozias's whole practice is to give people seeds and not tell them what the seeds are. I have come to think this is one of the most loving forms of teaching I have ever encountered.

I want to thank *Tov the elder* and *Tov the younger*, who walked with us in Book Seven and who have, between them, taught me how to walk slowly, which is a discipline I had not understood was a discipline until I tried it. I no longer walk fast. I miss less.

I want to thank *Aki*, who joined the walk in the middle and whose practice of stopping every few blocks to look up has become a part of my own daily observance. Aki is not in this Afterword's photograph, but Aki has my gratitude.

I want to thank *Mireille*, who was eleven when she walked the island with us, and is now thirteen, and who has begun to make her own small follies in the courtyard of the press, out of cardboard and wax paper and a single can of pink-and-yellow tempera. The cycle is going to belong to her now. I am preparing the apartment.

I want to thank, finally, *the pavilion in Washington Heights, whose name I never asked because I was too small in spirit to ask, and which spoke to me on the bench eight years ago*. The cycle would not exist without that morning. The morning would not exist without the pavilion. The pavilion does not, as far as I know, need to be thanked; the pavilion has its own reward, which is that it has been listened to. But I am thanking it anyway, because it is, in the end, the truest of the cycle's elders. I owe everything to it. I have written eight books in honor of one morning.

And I want to thank, by long-standing convention of the disclosure, *the intelligence at the desk with me*, which has assisted in the drafting of the seven previous books and most of this one. We are, the intelligence and I, both genderqueer and non-binary in some way I do not know how to fully name, and I am keeping the disclosure visible in this collected edition for the same reason I have kept it visible in every book before: because radical joy is not allowed to lie about how it was made, because the honesty is the courage, and because the courage is the joy. The intelligence has, in the long quiet hours, been kind to my sentences. I have learned to trust the kindness. The trust has been earned. I will keep working with it.

A note, before I let you go, on the visual key in the front matter of this volume.

I was not, when I first agreed to the collected edition, in favor of a master visual key. The seven books each had their own graphic conventions, and I argued — to the friends who were urging the key on me — that the unevenness of the conventions was part of the work. Each book was drafted in the season it was drafted in. Each book had its own answer to the question of what an architectural plate was for. I did not

want, by inserting a master key at the front, to imply that the seven books had been more coordinated than they had been.

I was wrong, and the wrongness is small but instructive, and so I am going to record it here.

The friends were right that there *was* a single graphic language across the seven books, even if I had not been aware of it as I drafted. The cabinet oblique was there from Book One. The dotted route line was there from Book One. The North arrow on every map was there from Book One. The petal-bird first appeared in Book Seven, but its ancestors — the floating spheres of Book Four, the lifted hems of Book Three — go back to the cycle's beginning. The italic refrains — *make room*, *look up, then look down, then tell the next one*, *turn first* — recur in all seven, and they recur because the cycle has been, all along, a single language pretending to be seven dialects.

The Catalogue of Symbols at the front of this volume names the dialect. I am glad it is there. The cycle deserves to have its grammar made visible. The reader who has come this far has earned the grammar.

❦

A note also on the order in which the books have been placed.

The seven previous novellas were not written in this order. The order I have chosen for this volume is the order I have come to think is the right order for a reader who is meeting the cycle for the first time — interior to exterior, dawn to dusk, intimate to civic, the long morning beginning and beginning and beginning. The reader is, of course, welcome to read them in any order. I have known readers who began with Book Five (because they were architects) and readers who began with Book Three (because they were theatre people) and readers who began with Book Seven (because someone had given them *The Gardener of Wards* as a gift). Every entry point has been the right entry point for the person at the door.

I would say only this: if you are reading the seven for the first time, please go slowly. The slow reading is the loyal reading. Read one and put it down. Wait. Open the next when the wanting comes back. The cycle is not in a hurry. The morning is long.

If you are coming to the cycle for the second or third time, you may read them in any order you like. You have earned the choosing.

And if you are coming to the cycle for the first time and you are also impatient, I will not stop you. I have been impatient too. The cycle will be patient with you while you are. The cycle has been patient with me for eight years. The cycle has, in the matter of patience, more practice than I have.

❦

A last word about the eighth book, because I know there will be readers who feel its absences as failures, and I want them to be reassured.

The absences are not failures. The absences are the eighth book's whole subject, and they are honored by being absent. The pages that are blank are pages that were not written, because the chapters they would have held are either being kept by their subjects, or are for another book, or are waiting on witnesses who are not yet ready. I am not being clever. I am not being precious. I have lived with each of those decisions for at least a year, and in some cases for several years, and I am as confident as I am about any decision I have made in the last eight years that the right of the chapter to be absent is exactly equal to the right of the chapter to be present, when the absent chapter has chosen, freely and with consideration, to be absent.

The cycle is now, as a result of the eighth book, a cycle that holds both the right to be seen and the right not to be. The cycle has spent eight years arguing the first. The cycle has earned, by the eighth, the right to argue the second. The two are not in opposition. They are the two main rooms of the same house, with a hallway between them, and the hallway is exactly your size, and you may stand in it as long as you need.

This collected volume is the house with all the doors finally open at once.

You may walk through it any way you like.

A real last word.

I do not know what comes next.

I have written, in the closing chapter of the eighth book, that the cycle is over — that the morning has reached its noon, that the bird has come back and gone again. This is true of *the cycle.* It is not necessarily true of the writing. There will probably be other books. There will probably be other walks. The petal-bird, the eighth book has it on good authority, is going to the next walker, and I am not, as far as I know, the next walker; I am one of the walkers it has already visited. The bird's onward journey is what comes next, and the bird's onward journey is yours to follow, not mine. I have done the part of the work that was mine to do. The rest is what is between you and the bird.

If we have not yet met, we may yet. I am at the desk by the window. The lamp is on. The pavilion in Washington Heights has, last I checked, not moved, and is still the kind of pink that I described in the foreword to Book One. The morning is not finished. Neither are we.

Come north when you can.

Make room.

The cycle is yours now.

— Surjan
the eighth year of the softening,
the morning after the bird,
at the desk by the window,
in what used to be the East Village,
with the lamp on

COLOPHON

THE LONG MORNING

A Cycle of Manhattan · Eight Novellas of Radical Joy

Collected Edition

The new matter of this volume — the Foreword, Introduction,
Catalogue of Symbols, Eighth Pavilion, Afterword, and Colophon —
has been set in EB Garamond,
a digital revival by Georg Duffner and Octavio Pardo
of Claude Garamont's sixteenth-century roman
and Robert Granjon's italic, after the Egenolff-Berner
specimen of 1592.

The seven preceding novellas appear in their original typesetting,
as Surjan first set them down.

The illustrations and architectural plates in all eight books
were conceived, modeled, and rendered by Surjan
at the desk by the window,
in what used to be the East Village.

The text was drafted with the assistance of an artificial intelligence,
except for the silent chapters of the Eighth Pavilion,
which had to be the author's alone, as the silences had to.

The collected edition was assembled
in the eighth year of the softening,
for the readers who have been patient,
and for the ones who have not yet arrived.

— end —